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THE WORKS OF

FREDERICK FAUST

THE "DAN BARRY" SERIES
VOLUME TWO

CONTENTS

Under the pseudonym:
MAX BRAND

THE SEVENTH MAN (Long Novel)

DAN BARRY'S DAUGHTER (Long Novel)

Collected, Edited and Bound By

DARRELL C. RICHARDSON

ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

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FIVE CONTINUED STORIES

The Seventh Man . . . . . Max Brand 289
A Six-Part Story — Part One
Let the Wedding Wait . . . . . J. L. Schoolcraft 319
A Four-Part Story — Part Two
Regular People . . . . . Edgar Franklin 359
A Five-Part Story — Part Four
Snowdrift . . . . . James B. Hendryx . . . 385
A Seven-Part Story — Part Five
Tophet at Trail's End . . . . . George Washington Ogden . 411
A Seven-Part Story — Part Seven

LONG COMPLETE STORY

Infatuation or What? . . . . . Eric White 347

FIVE SHORT STORIES

Piracy on the High Seas . . . . . H. Bedford-Jones 309
(A Skipper Struthers Story)
A Problem of the Pony Division . . Garret Smith 338
The Constant Sex . . . . . John Holden 379
Too Kind for Any Use . . . . . George Mariano 403
Above the Snow Line . . . . . T. F. T. West 427

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

Vol. CXXXVII SATURDAY, OCTOBER 1, 1921 Number 3

The Seventh Man

Part I

by Max Brand

Author of "Trailin'," "The Guide to Happiness," "Tiger," etc.

A Sequel to "The Untamed" and "The Night Horseman."

CHAPTER I.

SPRING.

A MAN under thirty needs neighbors, and to stop up the current of his life with a long silence is like obstructing a river—eventually the water either sweeps away the dam or rises over it, and the stronger the dam the more destructive is that final rush to freedom.

Vic Gregg was on the danger side of thirty, and he lived alone in the mountains all that winter. He wanted to marry Betty Neal, but marriage means money, therefore Vic contracted fifteen hundred dollars worth of mining for the Duncans, and instead of taking a partner he went after that stake single-handed.

He is a very rare man who can turn out that amount of labor in a single season, but Gregg furnished that exception which establishes the rule; he did the assessment work on fourteen claims and almost finished the fifteenth, yet he paid the price. Week after week his set of drills was wife and child to him, and for conversation he had only the clangor of the four-pound single-jack on the drill-heads, with the crashing of the "shots" now and then as periods in the chatter of iron on iron.

He kept at it, and in the end he almost finished the allotted work, but for all of it he paid in full.

The acid loneliness ate into him. To be sure, from boyhood he knew the mountain quiet, the heights and the solemn echoes, but toward the close of the long isolation the end of each day found him

oppressed by a weightier sense of burden; in a few days he would begin to talk to himself.

From the first the evening pause after supper hurt him most, for a man needs talk as well as tobacco, and after a time he dreaded these evenings so bitterly that he purposely spent himself every day, so as to pass from supper into sleep at a stride. It needed a long day to burn out his strength thoroughly, so he set his rusted alarm-clock, and before dawn it brought him groaning out of the blankets to cook a hasty breakfast and go slowly up to the tunnel.

In short he wedded himself to his work; he stepped into a routine which took the place of thought, and the change in him was so gradual that he did not see the danger.

A mirror might have shown it to him as he stood this morning at the door of his lean-to, for the wind fluttered the shirt around his labor-dried body, and his forehead puckered in a frown, grown habitual. It was a narrow face, with rather close-set eyes and a slanted forehead which gave token of a single-track mind, a single-purposed nature with one hundred and eighty pounds of strong sinews and iron-hard muscle to give it significance.

Such was Vic Gregg as he stood at the door waiting for the coffee he had drunk to brush away the cobwebs of sleep, and then he heard the eagle scream.

A great many people have never heard the scream of an eagle. The only voice they connect with the king of the air is a ludicrously feeble squawk, dim with distance, but in his great moments the eagle has a war-cry like that of the hawk, but harsher, hoarser, tenfold in volume. This sound cut into the night in the gulch, and Vic Gregg started and glanced about, for echoes made the sound stand at his side; then he looked up, and saw two eagles fighting in the light of the morning. He knew what it meant—the beginning of the mating season, and these two battling for a prize.

They darted away. They flashed together with reaching talons and gaping beaks, and dropped in a tumult of wings, then soared and clashed once more until one of them folded his wings and dropped like a falling rock. Perhaps the steel-sharp claws or the cruel beak of his enemy had reached his life, but in that breath of time the man noted that the body did not whirl as dead, falling things should do; yet it was inconceivable that a brain should be directing that plunge of a thousand yards.

Down it glanced, bulletlike, out of the morning into the night; and then, close over Gregg's head, the wings flirted out—ten feet from tip to tip—beat down with a great washing sound, and the bird shot up again with folded pinions, out of the darkness, into the light with a speed as giddy as his fall.

His foe hovered uneasily while the other bolted up into the pink of the dawn, whirled on outflung wings, and once more dived, but this time straight at his rival. He struck the unprotected back, and the impact drove them down five hundred feet through space, while a flurry of wings shut out the details of the struggle.

In a moment the conquered fighter shook himself free and slid away out of sight into the gloom of the valley of the Asper, while the victor, he of the strategic plunge, poised himself above and screamed a long insult down the hollow. For a while he balanced, craning his head as if he sought applause, then without visible movement of his wings sailed away over the peaks.

Vic Gregg looked down, then, and rubbed the ache out of the back of his neck. All about him the fresh morning was falling; yonder shone a green-mottled face of granite, and there a red iron blowout, streaked with veins of glittering silicate, and in this corner, still misted with the last delicate shades of night, glimmered rhyolite, lavender-pink. The single-jack dropped from the hand of Gregg, and his frown relaxed.

When he stretched his arms the cramps of labor unkinked and let the warm blood flow swiftly, and in the pleasure of it he closed his eyes and drew a luxurious breath. He stepped from the door with his head high and his heart lighter, and when his hob-nailed shoe clinked on the fallen hammer he kicked it spinning from his path.

That act brought a smile into his eyes, and he sauntered to the edge of the little

plateau and looked down into the wide chasm of the Asper valley.

Blue shadows washed across it, though morning shone around Gregg on the height, and his glance dropped in a two-thousand-foot plunge to a single yellow eye that winked through the darkness, a light in the trapper's cabin.

But the dawn was falling swiftly now, and while Gregg lingered the blue grew thin, purple-tinted, and then dark, slender points pricked up, which he knew to be the pines. Last of all, he caught the sheen of grass.

Around him pressed a perfect silence, the quiet of night holding over into the day, yet he cast a glance behind him as if he heard a voice. Indeed, he felt that some one approached him, some one for whom he had been waiting, yet it was a sad expectancy, and more like homesickness than anything he knew.

"Aw, hell!" said Vic Gregg. "It's spring."

A deep-throated echo boomed back at him, and the sound went down the gulch, three times repeated.

"Spring," repeated Gregg more softly, as if he feared to rouse that echo; "damned if it ain't!"

He shrugged his shoulders and turned resolutely toward the lean-to, picking up the discarded hammer on the way. By instinct he caught it at exactly the right balance for his strength and arm, and the handle, polished by his grip, played with an oiled, frictionless movement against the callouses of his palm. From the many hours of drilling, fingers crooked; he could only straighten them by a painful effort. A bad hand for cards, he decided gloomily, and still frowning over this thought he reached the door. There he paused in instant repugnance, for the place was strange to him.

In thought and wish he was even now galloping Grey Molly over the grass along the Asper, and he had to wrench himself into the mood of the patient miner. There lay his blankets, rumpled, brown with dirt, and he shivered at sight of them; the night had been cold.

Before he fell asleep he had flung the magazine into the corner and now the wind rustled its torn, yellowed pages in a whisper that spoke to Gregg of the ten-times repeated stories, tales of adventure, drifts of tobacco-smoke in gaming halls, the chant of the croupier behind the wheel, deep voices of men, laughter of pretty girls, tattoo of running horses, shouts which only red-eye can inspire.

He sniffed the air; odor of burned bacon and coffee permeated the cabin. He turned to the right and saw his discarded overalls with ragged holes at the knees; he turned to the left and looked into the face of the rusted alarm-clock. Its quick, soft ticking sent an ache of weariness through him.

"What's wrong with me?" muttered Gregg. Even that voice semed ghostly loud in the cabin, and he shivered again. "I must be going nutty."

As if to escape from his own thoughts, he stepped out into the sun again, and it was so grateful to him after the chill shadow in the lean-to, that he looked up, smiling, into the sky. A west wind urged a scattered herd of clouds over the peaks, tumbled masses of white which puffed into transparent silver at the edges, and behind, long wraiths of vapor marked the path down which they had traveled.

Such an old cow-hand as Vic Gregg could not fail to see the forms of cows and heavy-necked bulls and running calves in that drift of clouds. About this season the boys would be watching the range for signs of screw worms in the cattle, and the bog-riders must have their hands full dragging out cows which had fled into the mud to escape the heel flies. With a new lonesomeness he drew his eyes down to the mountains.

Ordinarily, strange fancies never entered the hard head of Gregg, but to-day it seemed to him that the mountains found a solemn companionship in each other. Out of the horizon, where the snowy forms glimmered in the blue, they marched in loose order down to the valley of the Asper, where some of them halted in place, huge cliffs, and others stumbled out into foothills, but the main range swerved to the east beside the valley, eastward out of his vision,

though he knew that they went on to the town of Alder.

Alder was Vic Gregg's Athens and Rome in one, its schoolhouse his Acropolis, and Captain Lorrimer's saloon his Forum. Other people talked of larger cities, but Alder satisfied the imagination of Vic; besides, Grey Molly was even now in the blacksmith's pasture, and Betty Neal was teaching in the school. Following the march of the mountains and the drift of the clouds, he turned toward Alder. The piled waters shook the dam, topped it, burst it into fragments, and rushed into freedom; he *must* go to Alder, have a drink, shake hands with a friend, kiss Betty Neal, and come back again.

Two days going, two days coming, three days for the frolic; a week would cover it all. And two hours later Vic Gregg had cached his heavier equipment, packed his necessaries on the burro, and was on the way.

By noon he had dropped below the snow-line and into the foothills, and with every step his heart grew lighter. Behind him the mountains slid up into the heart of the sky with cold, white winter upon them, but here below it was spring indubitably. There was hardly enough fresh grass to temper the winter brown into shining bronze, but a busy, awakening insect life thronged through the roots.

Surer sign than this, the flowers were coming. A slope of buttercups flashed suddenly when the wind struck it and wild morning-glory spotted a stretch of daisies with purple and dainty lavender. To be sure, the blossoms never grew thickly enough to make strong dashes of color, but they tinted and stained the hillsides. He began to cross noisy little water-courses, empty most of the year, but now the melting snow fed them. From eddies and quiet pools the bright water-cress streamed out into the currents, and now and then in moist ground under a sheltering bank he found rich patches of violets.

His eyes went happily among these tokens of the glad time of the year, but while he noted them and the bursting buds of the aspen, reddish-brown, his mind was open to all that middle register of calls which the human ear may notice in wild places. Far above his scale were shrilling murmurs of birds and insects, and beneath it ran those ground noises that the rabbit, for instance, understands so well; but between these overtones and undertones he heard the scream of the hawk, spiralling down in huge circles, and the rapid call of a grouse, far off, and the drone of insects about his feet, or darting suddenly upon his brain and away again.

He heard these things by the grace of the wind, which sometimes blew them about him in a chorus, and again shut off all except that lonely calling of the grouse, and often whisked away every murmur and left Gregg in the center of a wide hush with only the creak of the pack-saddle and the click of the burro's accurate feet among the rocks.

At such times he gave his full attention to the trail, and he read it as one might turn the pages of a book. He saw how a rabbit had scurried, running hard, for the prints of the hind feet planted far ahead of those on the forepaws. There was reason in her haste, for here the pads of a racing coyote had dug deeply into a bit of soft ground. The sign of both rabbit and coyote veered suddenly, and again the trail told the reason clearly—the big print of a labo's paw, that gray ghost which haunts the ranges with the wisest brain and the swiftest feet in the West.

Vic Gregg grinned with excitement; fifty dollars bounty if that scalp were his! But the story of the trail called him back with the sign of some small animal which must have traveled very slowly, for in spite of the tiny size of the prints, each was distinct.

The man sniffed with instinctive aversion and distrust, for this was the trail of the skunk, and if the last of the seven sleepers was out, it was spring indeed. He raised his cudgel and thwacked the burro joyously.

"Get on, Mame," he cried. "We're overdue in Alder."

Mame switched her tail impatiently and canted back a long ear to listen, but she did not increase her pace; for Mame had only one gait, and if Vic occasionally

thumped her, it was rather by way of conversation than in any hope of hurrying their journey.

CHAPTER II.

GREY MOLLY.

IF her soul had been capable of enthusiasm, Mame could have made the trip on schedule time, but she was a burro good for nothing except to carry a pack well-nigh half her own weight, live on forage that might have starved a goat, and smell water fifteen miles in time of drought. Speed was not in her vocabulary, and accordingly it was late afternoon rather than morning when Gregg, pointing his course between the ears of Mame, steered her through Murphy's Pass and came out over Alder.

There they paused by mutual consent, and the burro flicked one long ear forward to listen to the rushing of the Doane River. It filled the valley with continual murmur, and just below them, where the brown, white-flecked current twisted around an elbow bend, lay Alder, tossed down without plan, here a boulder and there a house. They seemed marvelously flimsy structures, and one felt surprise that the weight of the winter snow had not crushed them, or that the Doane River had not sent a strong current licking over the bank and tossed the whole village crashing down the ravine.

One building was very much like another, but Gregg's familiar eye pierced through the roofs and into Widow Sullivan's staggering shack, into Hezekiah Whittleby's hushed sitting-room, down to the moist, dark floor of the captain's saloon, into that amazing junk-shop, the general merchandise store; but first and last he looked to the little flag which gleamed and snapped above the schoolhouse, and it spelled "my country" to Vic.

Mame consented to break into a neat-footed jog-trot going down the last slope, and so she went up the single winding street of Alder, grunting at every step, with Gregg's whistle behind her. In town he lived with his friend, Dug Pym, who kept their attic room reserved for his occupancy, so he headed straight for that place. What human face would he see first?

It was Mrs. Sweeney's little boy, Jack, who raced into the street whooping, and Vic caught him under the arm-pits and swung him dizzily into the air.

"By God," muttered Vic as he strode on, "that's a good kid, that Jack!" And he straightway forgot all about that knife which Jackie had purloined from him the summer before. "Me and Betty," he thought, "we'll have kids like Jack; tougher'n leather."

Old Carrigan saw him next and cackled from his truck garden in the backyard, but Vic went on with a wave of his arm, and on past Gertie Vincent's inviting shout—Gertie had been his particular girl before Betty Neal came to town—and on with the determination of a soldier even past the veranda of Captain Lorrimer's saloon, though Lorrimer himself bellowed a greeting and "Chick" Stewart crooked a significant thumb over his shoulder toward the open door. He only paused at the blacksmith shop and looked in at Dug, who was struggling to make the print of a hot shoe on a hind foot of Simpson's sorrel Glencoe.

"Hey, Dug!"

Pym raised a grimy, sweating forehead.

"You, boy; easy, damn you! Hello, Vic!" and he propped that restless hind-foot on his inner thigh and extended a hand.

"Go on workin', Dug, because I can't stop; I just want a rope to catch Grey Molly."

"You red devil! Take that rope over there, Vic. You won't have no work catchin' Molly. Which she's plumb tame. Stand still, damn you! I never seen a Glencoe with any sense! Where you goin', Vic, up to the school?"

And the sweaty grin followed Vic as the latter went out with the coil of rope over his shoulder. When Gregg reached the house, Nelly Pym hugged him, which is the privilege of fat and forty, and then she sat at the foot of the stairs and shouted up gossip while he shaved with frantic haste and jumped into his best clothes. He answered her with monosyllables and only half his mind.

"Finish up your work, Vic?"

"Nope."

"You sure worked yourself all thin. I hope somebody appreciates it," she chuckled. "Ain't been sick, have you?"

"Nope."

"Say, who d'you think's in town? Sheriff Glass!"

This information sank in on him while he tugged at a boot at least a size and a half too small.

"Pete Glass!" he echoed. Then, "Who's he after?"

"I dunno, Vic, he don't look like such a bad one."

"He's plenty bad enough," Gregg assured her. "Ah-h!"

His foot ground into place, torturing his toes.

"Well," considered Mrs. Pym in a philosophic rumble, "I s'pose them quiet gents is the dangerous ones, mostly; but looking at Glass you wouldn't think he'd ever killed all those men. Know about the dance?"

"Nope."

"Down to Singer's place. Betty goin' with you?"

He jerked open the door and barked down at her: "Who else would she be goin' with?"

"Don't start pullin' leather before the hoss bucks," said Mrs. Pym. "*I* don't know who else she'd be goin' with. You sure look fine in that red shirt, Vic!"

He grinned, half mollified, half shamefaced, and ducked back into the room, but a moment later he clumped stiffly down the stairs, frowning. He wondered if he could dance in those boots.

"Feel kind of strange in these clothes. How do I look, Nelly?" And he turned in review at the foot of the stairs.

"Slick as a whistle, I'll tell a man." She raised her voice to a shout as he disappeared through the outer door. "Kiss her once for me, Vic."

In the center of the little pasture he stood shaking out the noose, and the three horses raced in a sweeping gallop around the fence, looking for a place of escape, with Grey Molly in the lead. Nothing up the Doane River, or even down the Asper, for that matter, could head Molly when she was full of running, and the eyes of Gregg gleamed as he watched her. She was not a picture horse, for her color was rather a dirty white than a dapple, and besides, there were some who accused her of "tucked-up belly." But she had the legs for speed in spite of the sloping croup, and plenty of chest at the girth, and a small, bony head that rejoiced the heart of a horseman. He swung the noose, and while the others darted ahead, stupidly, straight into the range of danger, Grey Molly whirled like a doubling coyote and leaped away.

"Good girl!" cried Vic, in involuntary approbation. He ran a few steps. The noose slid up and out, opened in a snaky loop, and swooped down. Too late the gray saw the flying danger, for even as she swerved the riata fell over her head, and she came to a snorting halt with all fours planted, skidding through the grass. The first thing a range horse learns is never to pull against a rope.

A few minutes later she was getting the "pitch" out of her system, as any self-respecting cattle-horse must do after a session of pasture and no work. She pitched and sunfished with enthusiasm and intelligence, as she did all things. Sunfishing is the most deadly form of bucking, for it consists of a series of leaps apparently aimed at the sun, and the horse comes down with a sickening jar on stiff front legs.

Educated "pitchers" land on only one foot, so that the shock is accompanied by a terrible sidewise, downward wrench that breaks the hearts of the best riders in the world. Grey Molly was educated, and Mrs. Pym stood in the doorway with a broad grin of appreciation on her red face; she knew riding when she saw it.

Then, out of the full frenzy, the mare lapsed into high-headed, quivering attention, and Gregg cursed her softly, with deep affection. He understood her from her fetlocks to her teeth. She bucked like a fiend of revolt one instant and cantered like an angel of grace the next; in fact, she was more or less of an equine counterpart of her rider.

But now he heard shrill voices passing down the street and he knew that school

was out and that he must hurry if he wanted to ride home with Betty, so he waved to Mrs. Pym and cantered away. For over two days he had been rushing toward this meeting; all winter he had hungered for it; but now that the moment loomed before him he weakened; he usually did when he came close to the girl.

Not that her beauty overwhelmed him, for though she had a portion of energetic good health and freckled prettiness, he had chosen her as an Indian chooses flint for his steel; one could strike fire from Betty Neal.

When he was far away he loved her without doubt or question, and his trust ran toward her like a river setting toward the ocean because he knew that her heart was as big and as true as the heart of Grey Molly herself. Only her ways were fickle, and when he came near she filled him with uneasiness, suspicion.

CHAPTER III.

BATTLE.

ON the road he passed Miss Brewster —for the Alder school boasted two teachers!—and under her kindly, rather faded smile he felt a great desire to stop and take her into his confidence; ask her what Betty Neal had been doing all these months. Instead he touched Grey Molly with the spurs, and she answered like a watch-spring uncurling beneath him. The rush of wind against his face raised his spirits to a singing pitch, and when he flung from the saddle before the school he shouted, "Oh, Betty!"

Up the sharply angling steps in a bound, and at the door, "Oh, Betty!"

His voice filled the room with a thick, dull echo, and there was Betty behind her desk looking up at him agape; and beside her stood Blondy Hansen, big, good-looking, and equally startled. Fear made the glance of Vic Gregg swerve to where little Tommy Aiken scribbled an arithmetic problem on the blackboard—after-school work for whispering in class, or some equally heinous crime. The tingling voices of the other children, on their way home, floated in to Tommy, and the corners of his mouth dropped.

To regain his poise, Vic tugged at his belt and felt the weight of the holster slipping into a more convenient place, then he sauntered up the aisle, sweeping off his sombrero. Every feeling in his body, every nerve, disappeared in a crystalline hardness, for it seemed to him that the air was surcharged by a secret something between Betty and young Hansen. Betty was out from behind her desk and she ran to meet him and took his hand in both of hers. The rush of her coming took his breath, and at her touch something melted in her.

"Oh, Vic, are you all through?"

Gregg stiffened for the benefit of Hansen and Tommy Aiken.

"Pretty near through," he said carelessly. "Thought I'd drop down to Alder for a day or two and get the kinks out. Hello, Blondy. Hey, Tommy!"

Tommy Aiken flashed a grin at him, but Tommy was not quite sure that the rules permitted speaking, even under such provocation as the return of Vic Gregg, so he maintained a desperate silence. Blondy had picked up his hat as he returned the greeting.

"I guess I'll be going," he said, and coughed to show that he was perfectly at ease, but it seemed to Vic that it was hard for Blondy to meet his eye when they shook hands. "See you later, Betty."

"All right." She smiled at Vic—a flash —and then gathered dignity of both voice and manner. "You may go now, Tommy."

She lapsed into complete unconsciousness of manner as Tommy swooped on his desk, included hat and book in one grab, and darted toward the door through which Hansen had just disappeared. Here he paused, tilting, and his smile twinkled at them with understanding. "Good night, Miss Neal. Hope you have a good time, Vic." His heel clicked twice on the steps outside, and then the patter of his racing feet across the field.

"The little mischief!" said Betty, delightfully flushed. "It beats everything, Vic, how Alder takes things for granted."

He should have taken her in his arms and kissed her, now that she had cleared

the room, he very well knew, but the obvious thing was always last to come in Gregg's repertoire.

"Why not take it for granted? It ain't going to be many days now."

He watched her eyes sparkle, but the pleasure of seeing him drowned the gleam almost at once.

"Are you really almost through? Oh, Vic, you've been away so long, and I—" She checked herself. There was no overflow of sentiment in Betty.

"Maybe I was a fool for laying off work this way," he admitted, "but I sure got terrible lonesome up there."

Her glance went over him contentedly, from the hard brown hands to the wrinkle which labor had sunk in the exact center of his forehead. He was all man, to Betty.

"Come on along," he said. He would kiss her by surprise as they reached the door. "Come on along. It's sure enough spring outside. I been eating it up, and—we can do our talking over things at the dance. Let's ride now."

"Dance?"

"Sure, down to Singer's place."

"It's going to be kind of hard to get out of going with Blondy. He asked me."

"And you said you'd go?"

"What are you flarin' up about?"

"Look here, how long have you been traipsin' around with Blondy Hansen?"

She clenched one hand beside her in a way he knew, but it pleased him more than it warned him, just as it pleased him to see the ears of Grey Molly go back.

"What's wrong about Blondy Hansen?"

"What's right about him?" he countered senselessly.

Her voice went a bit shrill. "Blondy is a gentleman, I'll have you know."

"Is he?"

"Don't you sneer at me, Victor Gregg. I won't have it!"

"You won't, eh?"

He felt that he was pushing her to the danger point, but she was perfectly, satisfyingly beautiful in her anger; he taunted her with the pleasure of an artist painting a picture.

"I won't!" she repeated, something else came to her lips, but she repressed it, and he could see the pressure from within telling.

"Don't get in a huff over nothing," he urged in real alarm. "Only it made me kind of mad to see Blondy standing there with that calf-look."

"What calf-look? He's a lot better to look at than you'll ever be."

A smear of red danced before the vision of Gregg.

"I don't set up for no beauty prize. Tie a pink ribbon in Blondy's hair and take him to a baby show if you want. He's about young enough to enter."

If she could have found a ready retort her anger might have passed away in words, but no words came, and she turned pale. It was here that Gregg made his crucial mistake, for he thought the pallor came from fear, fear which his sham jealousy had roused in her, perhaps. He should have maintained a discreet silence, but instead, he poured in the gall of complacency upon a raw wound.

"Blondy's all right," he stated beneficently, "but you just forget about him tonight. You're going to that dance, and you're going with me. If there's any explanations to be made, you leave 'em to me. I'll handle Blondy."

"You'll handle Blondy!" she whispered. Her voice came back; it rang, "You couldn't if he had one hand tied behind him." She measured him for another blow. "I'm going to that dance and I'm going with Mr. Hansen."

She knew that he would have died for her, and he knew that she would have died for him; accordingly they abandoned themselves to sullen fury.

"You're out of date, Vic," she ran on. "Men can't drag women around nowadays, and you can't drag me. Not—one—inch." She put a vicious little interval between each of the last three words.

"I'll be calling for you at seven o'clock."

"I won't be there."

"Then I'll call on Blondy."

"You don't dare to. Don't you try to bluff me. I'm not that kind."

"Betty, d'you mean that? D'you think that I'm yaller?"

"I don't care what you are."

"I ask you calm and impersonal, jest think that over before you say it."

"I've already thought it over."

"Then, by God!" said Gregg, trembling. "I'll never take one step out of my way to see you again."

He turned, so blind with fury that he shouldered the door on his way out, and so, into the saddle, with Grey Molly standing like a figure of rock, as if she sensed his mood. He swung her about on her hind legs with a wrench on the curb and a lift of his spurs, but when she leaped into a gallop he brought her back to the walk with a cruel jerk; she began to sidle across the field with her chin drawn almost back to her breast, prancing.

That movement of the horse brought him half-way around toward the door and he was tempted mightily to look, for he knew that Betty Neal was standing there, begging him with her eyes. But the great, sullen pain conquered; he straightened out the mare for the gate.

Betty was indeed at the door, leaning against it in a sudden weakness, and even in her pain she felt pride in the grace and skill of Vic's horsemanship. The hearts of both of them were breaking with this rather typical difference: that Gregg felt her to be entirely at fault, and that she as fully accepted every scruple of the blame. He had come down tired out and nervous from work he had done for her sake, she remembered, and if he would only glance back once—he must know that she was praying for it—she would cry out and run down to him; but he went on, on, through the gate.

A flash of her passion returned to her. "I *shall* go with Blondy—if it kills me." And she flung herself into the nearest seat and wept.

So when he reached the road and looked back at last, the doorway yawned black, empty, and he set his teeth with a groan and spurred down the road for Alder. He drew rein at Captain Lorrimer's and entered with curt nods in exchange for the greetings.

"Red-eye," he ordered, and seized bottle and glass as Lorrimer spun them deftly toward him.

Captain Lorrimer picked up the bottle and gazed at it mournfully when Vic had poured his drink.

"Son," he murmured, "you've sure raised an awful thirst."

CHAPTER IV.

KING HOL.

THERE is a very general and very erroneous impression that alcohol builds the mood of a man; as a matter of fact, it merely makes his temper of the moment fast—the man who takes his first drink with a smile ends in uproarious laughter, and he who frowns will often end in fighting.

Vic Gregg did not frown as he drank, but the corners of his lips turned up a trifle in a smile of fixed and acid pleasantry and his glance went from face to face in the barroom, steadily, with a trifling pause at each pair of eyes. Beginning with himself, he hated mankind in general; the burn of the cheap whisky within served to set the color of that hatred in a fixed dye. He did not lift his chaser, but his hand closed around it, hard. If some one had given him an excuse for a fist fight or an outburst of cursing it would have washed his mind as clean as a new slate, and five minutes later he might have been with Betty Neal, riotously happy.

Instead, every one overflowed with good nature, gossip, questions about his work, and the danger in him crystallized. He registered cold reasons for his disgust.

Beginning in the first person he loathed himself as a thick-headed ass for talking to Betty as he had done; as well put a burr under one's saddle and then feel surprise because the horse bucks. He passed on to the others with equal precision. Captain Lorrimer was as dirty as a greaser; and like a greaser, loose-lipped, unshaven. Chick Stewart was a born fool, and a fool by self-culture, as his never-changing grin amply proved. Lew Perkins sat in the corner on a shaky old apple-barrel and brushed back his long mustache to spit at the cuspidor—and miss it. If this were Vic Gregg's saloon he would teach the old loafer more accuracy or break his neck.

"How are you, Gregg?" murmured some one behind him.

He turned and found Sheriff Pete Glass with his right hand already spread on the bar while he ordered a drink for two. That was one of the sheriff's idiosyncrasies; he never shook hands if he could avoid it, and Gregg hated him senselessly, bitterly, for it. No doubt every one in the room noticed, and they would tell afterward how the sheriff had avoided shaking hands with Vic Gregg. Cheap play for notoriety, thought Gregg; Glass was pushing the bottle toward him.

"Help yourself," said Gregg.

"This is on me, Vic."

"I most generally like to buy the first drink."

Pete Glass turned his head slowly, for indeed all his motions were leisurely, and one could not help wondering at the stories of his exploits, the tales of his hair-trigger alertness. Perhaps these half-legendary deeds sent the thrill of uneasiness through Vic Gregg; perhaps it was owing to the singular hazel eyes, with little splotches of red in them; very mild eyes, but one could imagine anything about them. Otherwise there was nothing exceptional in Glass, for he stood well under middle height, a starved figure, with a sinewy crooked neck, as if bent by looking up to taller men. His hair was sandy, his face tawny-brown, his shirt a gray-blue, and every one knew his dusty roan horse; by nature, by temperament and by personal selection he was suited to blend into a landscape of sage-dotted plains or sand.

Tireless as a lobo on the trail, swift as a bobcat in fight, hunted men had been known to ride in and give themselves up when they heard that Pete Glass was after them.

"Any way you want, partner," he was saying in his soft, rather husky voice.

He poured his drink, barely enough to cover the bottom of his glass, for that was another of Pete's ways; he could never afford to weaken his hand or deaden his eye with alcohol, and even now he stood sidewise at the bar, facing Gregg and also facing the others in the room. But the larger man, with sudden scorn for this caution, brimmed his own glass, and poised it swiftly. "Here's how!" and down it went.

Ordinarily red-eye heated his blood and made his brain dizzy, it loosened his tongue and numbed his lips, but to-day it left him cool, confident, and sharpened his vision until he felt that he could see through the minds of every one in the room.

Captain Lorrimer, for instance, was telling a jocular story to Chick Stewart in the hope that Chick would set them up for every one; and old Lew Perkins was waiting for the treat; and perhaps the sheriff was wondering how he could handle Vic in case of need, or how long it would take to run him down. Not long, decided Gregg, breathing hard; no man in the world could put him on the run. Glass was treating in turn, and again the brimming drink went down Vic's throat and left his brain clear, wonderfully clear. He saw through Betty Neal now; she had purposely played off Blondy against him, to make them both jealous.

"Won't you join us, dad?" the sheriff was saying to Lew Perkins, and Vic Gregg smiled. He understood. The sheriff wanted an excuse to order another round of drinks because he had it in mind to intoxicate Gregg; perhaps Glass had something on him; perhaps the man-hunter thought that Vic had had a part in that Wilsonville affair two years back. That was it, and he wanted to make Vic talk when he was drunk.

"Don't mind if I do," Lew said, slapping both hands on the bar as if he owned it; and while he waited for his drink, "What are they going to do with Swain?"

The doddering idiot! Swain was the last man Glass had taken, and Lew Perkins should have known that the sheriff never talked about his work.

"Swain turned State's evidence," said Pete curtly. "He'll go free, I suppose. Fill up your glass, partner. I can see you're thirsty yet."

This was to Gregg, who had purposely poured out a drink of the sheriff's own chosen dimensions to see if the latter would notice; this remark fixed his suspicions. It was certain that the man-hunter was after him, but again, in scorn, he accepted the challenge and poured a stiff dram.

"That's right," nodded the sheriff. "You got nothing on your shoulders. You can let yourself go, Vic. Sometimes I wish"—he sighed—"I wish I could do the same!"

"The sneaky coyote," thought Gregg, "he's lurkin' me on!"

"Turned State's evidence!" maundered Lew Perkins. "Well, they's a lot of 'em that lose their guts when they're caught. I remember 'way back in the time when Bannack was runnin' full blast—"

Why did not some one shut off the old idiot before he was thoroughly started? He might keep on talking like the clank of a windmill in a steady breeze, endlessly. For Lew was old—seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five—he himself probably did not know just how old—and he had lived through at least two generations of pioneers with a myriad stories about them. He could string out tales of the Long Trail: Abilene, Wichita, Ellsworth, Great Bend, Newton, where eleven men were murdered in one night; he knew the vigilante days in San Francisco, and early times in Alder Gulch.

"Nobody would of thought Plummer was yaller, but he turned out that way," droned on the narrator. "Grit? He had enough to fit out twenty men. When Crawford shot him and busted his right arm, he went right on and learned to shoot with his left and started huntin' Jack agin. Packed that lead with him till he died, and then they found Jack's bullet in his wrist, all worked smooth by the play of the bones. Afterward it turned out that Plummer ran a whole gang; but before we learned that we'd been fools enough to make him sheriff. We got to Plummer right after he'd finished hangin' a man, and took him to his own gallows.

"You'd of thought a cool devil like that would of made a good end, but he didn't. He just got down on his knees and cried, and asked God to help him. Then he begged us to give him time to pray, but one of the boys up and told him he could do his prayin' from the cross-beam. And that was Henry Plummer, that killed a hundred men, him an his gang."

"H-m," murmured the sheriff, and looked uneasily about. Now that his eyes were turned away, Vic could study him at leisure, and he wondered at the smallness of the man. Suppose one were able to lay hands on him it would be easy to—

"See you later, boys," drawled Glass, and sauntered from the room.

Lew Perkins sighed as the most important part of his audience disappeared, but having started talking, the impetus carried him along; he held Vic Gregg with his hazy eyes.

"But they didn't all finish like Plummer, not all the bad ones. No, sirree! There was Boone Helm."

"I've heard about him," growled Vic, but the old man had fixed his glance and his reminiscent smile upon the past and his voice was soft with distance when he spoke again.

"Helm was a sure enough bad one, son. They don't grow like him no more. Wild Bill was a baby compared with Helm, and Slade wasn't no man at all, even leavin' in the lies they tell about him. Why son, Helm was just a lobo in the skin of a man—"

"Like Barry?" put in Lorrimer, drifting closer down the bar.

"Who's he?"

"Ain't you heard of Whistlin' Dan? The one that killed Jim Silent and busted up his gang. Why, they say he's got a wolf that he can talk to like it was a man."

Old Lew chuckled.

"They say a lot of things," he nodded; "but I'll tell a man that a wolf is a wolf, and they ain't nothin' that can tame 'em. Don't you let 'em feed you up on lies like that, Lorrimer. But Helm was sure bad. He killed for the sake of killin'; but he died game. When the boys run him down he swore on the Bible that he'd never killed a man, and they made him swear it over again just to watch his nerve; but he never batted an eye."

The picture of that wild time grew up for Vic Gregg, and the thought of free men who laughed at the law, strong men, fierce men. What would one of these have done if the girl he intended to marry had treated him like a foil?

"Then they got him ready for the rope," went on Lew Perkins. "'I've seen a tolerable lot of death,' says Helm. 'I ain't

afraid of it.' There was about six thousand folks had come in to see the end of Boone Helm. Somebody asked him if he wanted anything.

"'Whisky,' says Boone. And he got it.

"Then he shook his hand and held it up. He had a sore finger and it bothered him a lot more than the thought of hangin'.

"'You gents get through with this or else tie up my finger,' he kept sayin'.

"Helm wasn't the whole show. There was some others bein' hung that day, and when one of them dropped off his box, Boone says: 'There's one gone to hell.' Pretty soon another went, and hung there wiggling, and six times he went through all the motions of pullin' his six-shooter and firin' it. I counted. 'Kick away, old fellow,' says Boone Helm, 'I'll be with you soon.' Then it came his turn, and he hollered: 'Hurrah for Jeff Davis; let her rip!' That was how Boone Helm—"

The rest of the story was blotted from the mind of Vic Gregg by the thud of a heavy heel on the veranda, and then the broad shoulders of Blondy Hansen darkened the doorway, Blondy Hansen dressed for the dance, with the knot of his black silk handkerchief turned to the front and above that the gleam of his celluloid collar.

It was dim in the saloon, compared with the brightness of the outdoors, and perhaps Blondy did not see Vic. At any rate he took his place at the other end of the bar. Three pictures tangled in the mind of Gregg like three bodies in a whirlpool—Betty, Blondy, Pete Glass. That strange clearness of perception increased and the whole affair lay plainly before him. Betty had sent Hansen, dressed manifestly for the festival, to gloat over Vic in Lorrimer's place. He was at it already.

"All turned out for the dance, Blondy, eh? Takin' a girl?"

"Betty Neal," answered Blondy.

"The hell you are!" inquired Lorrimer, mildly astonished. "I thought — why, Vic's back in town, don't you know that?"

"He ain't got a mortgage on what she does."

Then, guided by the side-glance of Lorrimer, Hansen saw Gregg, and he stiffened. As for Vic, he perceived the last link in his chain of evidence. Hansen was going to a dance, and yet he wore a gun, and there could be only one meaning in that: Betty had sent him down there to wind up the affair.

"Didn't see you, Vic," Blondy was saying, his flushed face seeming doubly red against the paleness of his hair. "Have something?"

"I ain't drinkin'," answered Gregg, and slowly, to make sure that no one could miss his meaning, he poured out a glass of liquor, and drank it with his face toward Hansen. When he put his glass down his mind was clearer than ever; and with omniscient precision, with nerveless calm, he knew that he was going to kill Blondy Hansen; knew exactly where the bullet would strike. It was something put behind him; his mind had already seen Hansen fall, and he smiled.

Dead silence had fallen over the room, and in the silence Gregg heard a muffled, ticking sound, the beating of his heart; heard old Lew Perkins as the latter softly, slowly, glided back out of the straight line of danger; heard the quick breathing of Captain Lorrimer who stood pasty pale, gaping behind the bar; heard the gritted teeth of Blondy Hansen, who would not take water.

"Vic," said Blondy, "it looks like you mean trouble. Anyway, you just now done something that needs explaining."

He stood straight as a soldier, rigid, but the fingers of his right hand twitched, twitched, twitched; the hand itself stole higher. Very calmly, Vic hunted for his words, found them.

"A cattle rustler is bad," he pronounced, "a hoss thief is worse, but you're the lowest sneak of the lot, Blondy."

Again that silence with the pulse in it, and Vic Gregg could feel the chill which numbed every one except himself.

The lower jaw of Captain Lorrimer sagged, and his whisper came out in jerking syllables: "God Al-mighty!" Then Blondy went for his gun, and Vic waited with his hand on the butt of his own, waited with a perfect, cold foreknowledge, heard Blondy moan as his Colt hung in the holster, saw the flash of the barrel as it whipped out,

and then jerked his own weapon and fired from the hip. Blondy staggered, but kept himself from falling by gripping the edge of the bar with his left hand; the right, still holding the gun, raised and rubbed across his forehead; he looked like a sleeper awakening.

Not a sound from any one else, while Vic watched the tiny wraith of smoke jerk up from the muzzle of his revolver. Then Blondy's gun flashed down and clanked on the floor. A red spot grew on the breast of Hansen's shirt; now he leaned as if to pick up something, but instead, slid forward on his face. Vic stepped to him and stirred the body with his toe; it wabbled, limp.

CHAPTER V.

THE FLIGHT.

THERE were three spots of white in the dim saloon, the faces of Stewart, Lorrimer, and old Lew Perkins, and at the feet of Vic grew a spot of red. Knowing with calm surety that no hand would lift against him even if he turned his back, he walked out the door without a word and swung into the saddle.

There, for an instant, he calculated chances, for the street stretched empty before and behind with not a sound of warning stirring in the saloon. He was greatly tempted to ride to Dug Pym's for his blanket roll and a few other traveling necessities, but he remembered that the men of Alder rose to action with astonishing speed; within five minutes a group of hard riders would be clattering up his trail with Pete Glass at their head. An unlucky Providence had sent Pete to Alder on this day of all days. There stood his redoubtable dusty roan at the hitching rack, her head low, one ear back and one flopped forward, her under lip pendulous—in a pasture full of horses one might pick her last either for stout heart or speed.

Even in spite of her history Vic would have engaged Grey Molly to beat the roan at equal weights; but since he outbulked the sheriff full forty pounds, he weighed in nice balance the necessity of shooting the roan before he left Alder. It was, he decided, unpleasant but vital, and his fingers had already slid around the butt of his gun when a horse whinnied far off and the roan twitched up her head to listen.

She was no longer a cloddish lump of horseflesh, but an individual, a soul; Gregg's hand fell from his gun. Cursing his sentimental weakness, he lifted Molly into a canter down the street. Still no signs of awakening behind him or about; only little Jack Sweeney playing tag with a black-and-tan puppy, the triumphant cackle of a hen somewhere to the left; but as he neared the end of the street, where the trail swung into the rocks of the slope, a door banged far off and a voice was screaming: "Pete! Pete Glass!"

Grey Molly switched her tail nervously at the shout, but Vic was too wise to let her waste strength hurrying up so sharp a declivity; that dusty roan whose life he had spared would be spending it prodigally to overtake him before long, and Molly's power must be husbanded. So he kept her at a quick walk by pressing the calf of one leg into her flank and turned in the saddle to watch the town sink behind him. Some time in the vague, stupid past Mame had jog-trotted down this slope, but now he was a new man with an eye which saw all things and a gun which could not fail.

Figures, singularly tiny and singularly distinct, swarmed into the street from nowhere; men on horses, men swinging into saddles; here and there the slant light of the afternoon twinkled on gun barrels, and ludicrous thin voices came piping up the hill. As he reached the nether lip of Murphy's Pass a small cavalcade detached itself from the main mass before Captain Lorrimer's saloon and swept down the street, first a dusty figure on a dusty horse, hardly visible; then a spot of red which must be Harry Fisher on his blood-bay, with a long-striding sorrel beside him that could carry no one except grim old Slivers Waldron.

Behind these rode one with the light glinting on his silver conchos—Mat Henshaw, the town Beau Brummel—then the black of Gus Reeve, and last of all "Ronicky" Joe on his pinto; Ronicky Joe, handy man at all things, and particularly guns.

It showed how fast Pete Glass could work and how well he knew Alder, for Vic himself could not have selected five cooler fighters among the villagers or five finer mounts. The posse switched around the end of the street and darted up the hill like the curling lash of a whip.

"Good," said Vic Gregg. "The damn fools will wind their horses before they hit the pass."

He put Grey Molly into an easy trot, for the floor of the pass dipped up and down, littered with sharp-toothed rocks or treacherous, rolling ones, as bad a place for speed as a stiff up-slope. According to his nicest calculation the posse could not reach the edge of the gulch before he was at the farther side, out of range of everything except a long chance shot, so he took note of things as he went and observed a spot of pale silver skirting through the brush on the eastern ridge of the gorge.

There would be moonlight that night and another chance in favor of Pete Glass. He remembered then, with quiet content, that jogging in the holster was a power which with six words might stop those six pursuers.

A long halloo came barking down the pass, now drawling out, now cut away to silence as the angling cliffs sent on the echo, and Vic loosened the rein. It allowed Grey Molly to swing out with a snort of relief to a free-swinging gallop and they swept down a great, gentle slope where new grass padded the fall of her hoofs, yet even then he kept the mare checked and held her in touch with an easily playing wrist.

He did not imagine that even the sheriff on the dusty roan would dream of trying to swallow up Grey Molly in a short sprint but that assurance nearly cost Vic Gregg his life.

The roar of hoofs in the gulch belched out into the comparative silence of the open space beyond, and just as he gave the mare her head a gun coughed and an angry humming darted past his ear.

While Grey Molly stretched into full speed he glanced back, once, and saw the dusty roan racing out of Murphy's Pass. He thought for an instant of returning the bullet, but it is thrice harder to turn and fire to the rear from a galloping horse than it is to shoot straight ahead. Besides, with Molly lunging down the slope he had to center his attention on their course, for it is a simple thing to break a horse's leg going at such a rate down hill. The posse had six chances, but he had only one.

With Molly overstepping the uneven places and the rocks with the surety of a goat, even though he could not tell on account of the muffling grass whether the pursuit was gaining or losing he trusted blindly to the mare. He did not look back again until they swung into the lower levels of the Asper Valley, with the posse streaking along the slope far behind, and already pulling their mounts down to a hand gallop. That would teach them to match Molly in a sprint, roan or no roan!

He slapped her below the withers, where the long, hard muscles rippled back and forth. She was full of running, her gallop as light as the toss of a bough in the wind, and now as he pulled her back to a swinging canter her head went high, with pricking ears. Suddenly his heart went out to her; she would run like that till she died, he knew.

"Good girl," he whispered huskily, and stroked her neck gently.

He spent all his energy choosing the easiest way, sometimes detouring to avoid a sharp slope; twice he threw himself from the saddle and swam beside her as Molly forded a stream. The day was paling toward the end when he headed into the foothills of the White Mountains.

On the comparatively level stretches along the Asper he knew that Molly kept the posse easily in play, for, a confession of weakness, they suited their gait to his; but when she began to climb through the hills the advantage changed. Molly's long legs were not meant for climbing; moreover, she had not been worked regularly for months, and though her spirit was on edge she needed toughening, while every horse behind was hard with constant labor.

They probably could have caught Vic before he reached the crest of the mountains if they had pressed as fast as possible, but they kept in line the lesson of that first sprint. Perhaps they feared to frighten

their quarry entirely out of view, which would be dangerous in the dim ravines. Even moonlight of the brightest was not like day.

A fact which Gregg realized perfectly, and once, twice, and again he pushed Grey Molly to the very limit through the gray evening.

Granted that he were once well beyond view and earshot he might do a dozen things to shake them off—double straight back down the Asper, for instance; but these efforts to draw out of range merely brought the head of Molly lower and set her sides laboring. The pursuit hung unflaggingly behind.

After one of these bursts he stopped her for a breathing moment on the shoulder of a hill. It was about half-way toward the summit, and already he was close to the snow-line with ragged heads of white rearing above him. Far below, a pale streak of moonlight was the Asper. Then, out of that blacker night on the slopes beneath, he heard the clinking hoofs of the posse; the quiet was so perfect, the air so clear, that he even caught the chorus of straining saddle-leather, and then voices of men.

All this time the effects of the whisky had been wearing away by imperceptible degrees, and at that sound all his old self rushed back on Vic Gregg. Why, they were his friends, his partners, these voices in the night, and that clear laughter floated up from Harry Fisher, who had been his bunkie at the Circle V Bar Ranch three years ago. He felt an insane impulse to lean over the edge of the cliff and shout a greeting down to Harry—some taunt about old Baldy horse which had thrown Harry that Sunday afternoon.

But the riders fell silent again at a low, sharp command—Pete Glass. It was a posse, it rode on the trail of the murderer of Blondy Hansen, big, harmless, cheery, gentle Blondy, and that murderer was Vic Gregg! For the first time terror laid hold on Vic, and he spurred Molly into a terrible gallop that sent her floundering up the slope, scattering pebbles, stumbling over stones, and presently breathing with a great gasp and rattle. Only that danger signal brought the senses back to Vic and made him ride cautiously once more, but the new coolness, the eagle-eye was gone, and in its place was fear.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RIFLE.

DAWN found him over the first crest; at noon he was struggling up the slope of the second range, whose rise was not half so sharp as the upward plunge out of the Asper, but in spite of that easier ground Grey Molly could not gain. She went with shorter steps now, and her head hung lower and lower, yet when a downstretch opened before her she went at it with a gallop as light, almost, as her race out of Murphy's Pass.

Not once had she offered to stop; not once had she winced from the labor of some sharp up-pitch; but still six horsemen hung behind her, and at their head rode a little dusty man on a little dusty roan. It was the lack of training as well as the rough going which held Molly back.

Beyond that second range, however, the down-slope stretched smoothly, evenly, for mile on mile and mile on mile; perfect going for Grey Molly over easy hills with patches of forest here and there where he might double, or where he might stop with the hunt sweeping past. All this the sheriff must have known perfectly well, for he no longer kept back with his pack of five, but skirted on ahead, hunting alone. Again and again Vic heard the little shrill whistle with which Pete Glass encouraged the roan. Vic used the spurs twice, and then he desisted from the useless brutality, for Molly was doing her best and no power on earth could make her do more.

After all, her best would be good enough, for now Vic looked up and his heart leaped into his throat; there was only one more rise above him, and beyond lay the easy ground and a running chance for Molly's slender legs. Even as he raised his head something whined evilly over him, followed by a sound like two heavy hammers swung together, face to face, and shattered by the stroke. A rifle!

He looked back, saw the roan standing

broadside toward him, watched the sun waver and then flash in a straight, steady line along the barrel of the sheriff's gun. The line of light jerked up, and before the sound reached him a blow on his right shoulder sent Vic lurching forward against the pommel. Afterward the voice of the rifle rang around him and a sharp pain twitched up and down his side, then ran tingling to his finger-tips.

It was the stunning blow which saved him, for the sheriff had the range and his third bullet would have clipped Vic between the shoulders, but Glass had seen his quarry pitch forward in the saddle and he would not waste ammunition. The thrift of his New England ancestry spoke in Pete now and then, and he could only grit his teeth when he saw Vic disappearing on the other side of the crest, straighten in the saddle; the next instant the top of the hill shielded the fugitive.

Well and nobly then Grey Molly repaid all the praise, all the tenderness and care which Vic had lavished upon her in the past years, for with her legs shaking from the struggle of that last climb, with a rider who wabbled crazily in his seat, with reins hanging loose on her neck, with not even a voice to guide or to encourage her, she swept straight across the falling ground gaining strength and courage at every stride.

By the time Vic had regained his self-control and rallied a little from that first terrible falling of the heart, the dusty roan was over the crest and streaking after the game. Grey Molly gained steadily, yet even when he gathered the reins in his left hand Vic knew that the fight was done, in effect. How could he double or dodge when his own blood spotted the trail he kept, and how long could he keep the saddle with the agony which tore like saw-teeth at his shoulder?

Grey Molly plunged straight into the shadow of pine trees, and the cool gloom fell like a blessing upon Vic in his torment; it was heaven to be sheltered even for a few moments from the eyes of the posse. At the opposite edge of the wood he drew rein with a groan. Some devil had prompted Gus Reeve and some devil had poured Reeve's horse full of strength, for yonder down the valley, not a hundred yards away, galloped a rider on a black horse; yet Vic could have sworn that when he looked back from the crest he had seen Gus riding the very last in the posse.

An instant later the illusion vanished, for the black horse of Gus was never an animal such as this, never had this marvelous, long gait. Its feet flicked the earth and shot it along with a reaching stride so easy, so flowing that only the fluttered mane and the tail stretching straight behind gave token of the speed. For the rest, it carried its head high, with pricking ears, the sure sign of a horse running well within his strength; yet Grey Molly, fresh and keen for racing, could hardly have kept pace with the black as it slid over the hills.

God in Heaven, if such a horse were his a thousand sheriffs on a thousand dusty roans could never take him; five minutes would sweep him out of sight and reach.

Before the horseman ran a tall dog, wolfish in head and wolfish in the gait, which carried it like a cloud-shadow over the ground, but it was overlarge for any wolf Vic had ever seen. It turned its head now, and leaped aside at sight of the stranger, but the rider veered from his course and swept down on Vic. He came to a halt close-up without either a draw at the reins or a spoken word, probably controlling his mount with pressure of the knees, and Gregg found himself facing a delicately handsome fellow.

He was neither cow-puncher nor miner, Vic knew at a glance, for that face had never been haggard with labor. A tenderfoot, probably, in spite of his dress, and Vic felt that if his right arm were sound he could take that horse at the point of his gun and leave the rider thanking God that his life had been spared; but his left hand was useless on the butt of a revolver, and three minutes away came the posse, racing. There was only time for one desperate appeal.

"Stranger," he burst out, "I'm follered. I got to have your hoss. Take this one in exchange; it's the best I ever threw a leg over. Here's two hundred bucks—" He flung his wallet on the ground and swung himself out of the saddle.

The wolfish dog, which had growled softly all this time and roughed up the hair of its neck, now slunk forward on its belly.

"Heel, Bart!" commanded the stranger sharply, and the dog whipped about and stood away, whining with eagerness.

The moment Gregg's feet struck the ground his legs buckled like saplings in a wind, for the long ride had sapped his strength, and the flow of blood told rapidly on him now. The hills and trees whirled around him until a lean, strong hand caught him under either arm-pit. The stranger stood close.

"You could have my hoss if you could ride him," said he. His voice was singularly unhurried and gentle. "But you'd drop out of the saddle in ten minutes. Who's after you?"

A voice shouted, far off beyond the wood; another voice answered, nearer, and the whole soul of Gregg turned to the stallion. Grey Molly was blown, she stood now with hanging head and her flanks sunk in alarmingly at every breath, but even fresh from the pasture she was not a rag, not a straw compared to the black.

"For God's sake," groaned Vic, "*loan* me your hoss!"

"You couldn't stick the saddle. Come in here out of sight; I'm going to take 'em off your trail."

While he spoke he led, half carried Vic, into a thicket of shrubs with a small, open space at the center. The black and the wolf-dog followed and now the stranger pulled at the bridle-rein. The stallion kneeled like a trained dog, and lying thus the shrubbery was high enough to hide him. Closer, sweeping through the wood, Vic heard the crash of the pursuit, yet the other was maddeningly slow of speech.

"You stay here, partner, and sit over there. I'm borrowin' your gun"—a swift hand appropriated it from Vic's holster and his own fingers were too paralyzed to resist—"and don't you try to ride my hoss unless you want them teeth in your throat. Lie quiet and tie up your hurt. Bart, watch him!"

And there sat Gregg where he had slipped down in his daze of weakness with the great dog crouched at his feet and snarling ominously every time he raised his hand. The voices came closer; the crashing burst on his very ears, and now, through the interstices of the shrubbery he saw the stranger swing into the saddle on Grey Molly and urge her to a gallop. He could follow them for only an instant with his eyes, but it seemed to Vic that Molly cantered under her new rider with strange ease and lightness. It was partly the rest, no doubt, and partly the smaller burden.

A deep beat of racing hoofs, and then the dusty roan shot out of the trees close by with the sheriff leaning forward, jockeying his horse. It seemed that no living thing could escape from that relentless rider. Then right behind Vic a horse snorted and grunted—as it leaped a fallen log, perhaps—and he watched in alarm to see if the stallion would answer that sound with start or whinny.

The black lay perfectly still, and instead of lifting up to answer or to look, the head lowered with ears flat back until the long, outstretched neck gave the animal a snaky appearance. The dog, too, though it showed murderous fangs whenever Vic moved, did not stir from his place, but lay flattening into the ground.

"Cut to the right! Cut to the right, Harry!" came the voice of the sheriff, already piping from the distance as the last of the posse brushed out from the trees. "Yo hoi! Gus, take the left arroyo!"

Two answering yells, and then the rush of hoofs fell away. They were cornering the stranger, no doubt, and Vic struggled to lift himself to his feet and watch until a faint sound from the dog made him look down. Bart lay with his haunches drawn up under him, his forepaws digging into the soft loam, his eyes demoniac. Instinctively Vic reached for his absent gun, and then, despairing, relaxed to his former position.

The wolf-dog lowered his head to his paws and there remained with the eyes following each intake of Gregg's breath. A rattle of gun-shots flung back loosely from the hills, and among them Vic winced at the sound of the sheriff's rifle, clear and ringing over the bark of the revolvers.

Had they nailed the stranger? The firing

recommenced, more faintly and prolonged, so that it was plain the posse maintained a running fusilade after the fugitive. After that fear of his own growing weakness shut out all else from the mind of Gregg as he felt his senses, his physical strength, flowing out like an ebb-tide to a sea which, he knew, was death.

He began to work desperately to bind up the wound and stop the flow of blood, and it was the fear which gave him momentary strength to tear away his shirt and then with his teeth and left hand rip it into strips. After that, heedless of the pain, he constructed a rude bandage, very clumsily, for he had to work over his shoulder. Here his teeth, once more, were almost as useful as another hand, and as the bandage drew tight the deadly, warm trickle along his side lessened and his fingers fell away from the last knot. He fainted.

CHAPTER VII.

JOAN DISOBEYS.

WHAT he next knew was a fire of agony that wrapped his whole body and consciousness flashed back on him. Strong arms lifted him up, up; above him he sensed the eyes of his torturer, dim in moonlight, and he beat his clubbed left fist into that face. After that he knew he was being dragged onto a saddle, but a wave of pain rushed up his side and numbed his brain.

Thereafter his senses returned by fits and starts, vaguely. Once he felt a steel cable that girdled his waist and breast and held him erect, though his head flopped back and forth; once his eyes opened, and above him glittered the bright field of the stars toward which he drifted through space, a mind without a body; once a stab of torment wakened him enough to hear, "Easy, Satan; watch them stones. One more jolt like that will send him clear to—" And the voice glided into an eternity of distance.

Yet again he swung up from the pit of darkness and became aware of golden hair around a woman's face, and a marvelous, soft, cool hand upon his forehead. Her voice reached him, too, and made him think of all things musical, all things distant, like the sounds of birds falling from the sky, and though he understood not a syllable, a sweet assurance of safety flooded through him. He slept.

When he woke again it was from a dream of fleeing through empty air swifter than the wind with a wolf-dog looming behind him out of space, but presently he found that he was lying in a bed with a stream of sunlight washing across a white coverlet. A door at his right swung open, and there, in the entrance, stood the wolf-dog of his vision with a five-year-old girl upon its back.

"Don't go in there, Bart!" whispered the child. "Go on back!"

She took one of those pointed wolf-ears in her chubby fist and tugged to swing him around, but Bart, with a speed which the eye could not follow, twisted his head and the rows of great teeth closed over her hand. It was so horrible that the cry froze in the throat of Gregg, yet the child, with only a little murmur of anger, reached over with her other hand and caught the wolf by the nose.

"Bad Bart!" she whispered, and raised the hand which he instantly released. White marks showed on the pudgy tan. "Bad dog!" she repeated, and beat his neck with an impotent little fist. The wolf-dog cringed, and turned from the door.

"Come in," invited Gregg. He was surprised to find his voice thin, apt to swing up to a high pitch beyond his control. A shower of golden curls tossed away from her face as she looked to him.

"Oh!" she cried, still with a guarded voice.

She leaned far over, one hand buried in the ruff of Bart's neck to secure her balance, and with the other she laid hold of his right ear and drew him around facing the door once more. This time he showed his teeth, but submitted, only twitching the ear back and forth a time or two when she relaxed her hold.

"Come in," repeated Gregg.

She canted her head to one side and considered him with fearless blue eyes.

"I want to," she sighed.

"Why can't you, honey?"

"Munner says no."

He attempted to turn further toward her, but the pain in his right shoulder prevented. He found that his arm was bandaged to the elbow and held close to his side by a complex swathing.

"Who is your mother?" asked Vic.

"Munner?" she repeated, frowning in wonder. "Why, munner is—my munner."

"Oh," smiled he, "and who's your pa?"

"What?"

"Who's your father? Who's your dad?"

"Daddy Dan. You ask a lot of things," she added, disapprovingly.

"Come on in," pleaded Vic Gregg, "and I won't ask nothin' more about you."

"Munner says no," she repeated.

She employed the moment of indecision by plucking at the hair of Bart's shoulders; he growled softly, terribly, but she paid not the slightest heed.

"Your mother won't care," asserted Vic.

"I know," she nodded, "but daddy will."

"Spanking?"

She looked blankly at him.

"What will he do, then, if you come in to see me?"

"He'll look at me." She grew breathless at the thought, and cast a guilty glance over her shoulder.

"Honey," chuckled Gregg, weakly, "I'll take all the blame. Just you come along in and he'll do his lookin' at me."

He thought of the slender fellow who had rescued him, and his large, gentle brown eyes, but to a child even those mild eyes might seem terrible with authority.

"Will you, true?" said the child, wistfully.

"Honest and true."

"All right." She made up her mind instantly, her face shining with excitement. "Giddap, Bart." And she thumped the wolf-dog vigorously with her heels.

He carried her in with a few gliding steps, soundless, except for the light rattle of claws on the floor, but he stepped well out of reach of the bed, and when Vic held his left hand as far as he could across his chest, Bart winced and gave harsh warning. Vic had seen vicious dogs in his day, seen them fighting, seen them playing, but he had never heard one of them growl like this.

The upper lips of the animal twitched dangerously back and the sound came from the very depths of his body. It made the flesh crawl along Vic's back; one rip of those great teeth could tear a man's throat open. The child thudded her heels against the ribs of Bart again.

"Giddap!" she cried.

The wolf-dog shuddered but would not budge an inch.

"Naughty Bart!" She slipped off to the floor. I'll make him come," she said.

"If it's the same to you," said Vic, rather hastily, "I'd just as soon be stayed where he is."

"He's got to do what I want," she answered. She shook a tiny forefinger at him. "Bart, you just come here!"

The dog turned his blazing eyes on her and replied with a growl that shook his sides.

"Stop!" she ordered, and struck him sharply on the nose. He blinked and lowered his head under the blow, but though the snarling stopped his teeth flashed. She caught him by both jowls and tugged him forward.

"Let him be!" urged Vic.

"He's got to come!"

And come he did, step by halting step, while she hauled him, and now the snarling hoarse intakes of breath filled the room. Once she moved a little to one side and Vic caught the glint of two eyes, red-stained, which were fixed undeviatingly upon her face.

Mixed with Vic's alarm at the great fighting beast was a peculiar uneasiness, for there was something uncanny in the determination, the fearlessness of this infant. When she stepped away the wolf-dog stood trembling visibly, but his eyes were still not upon the man he hated or feared to approach but upon the child's face.

"Can you pat him now?" she asked, not for an instant turning to Gregg.

"No, but it's close enough," he assured her. "I don't want him any closer."

"He's got to come." She stamped. "Bart, you come here!"

He flinched forward, an inch. "Bart!" Her hands were clenched and her little body quivered with resolution; the snake-like head came to the very edge of the bed.

"Now pat him!" she commanded.

By very unpleasant degrees, Vic stretched his hand toward that growling menace.

"He'll take my arm off," he complained. Shame kept him from utterly refusing the risk.

"He won't bite you one bit," declared the child. "But I'll hold his nose if you're afraid." And instantly she clasped the pointed muzzle between her hands.

Even when Vic's hand hovered above his head Bart had no eye for him, could not divert his gaze from the face of the child. Once, twice and again, delicately as one might handle bubbles, Gregg touched that scarred forehead.

"I made him come, didn't I?" she cried in triumph, and turned a tense little face toward Vic, but the instant her eyes moved the wolf-dog leaped away half the width of the room, and stood shivering, more devilish than ever. She stamped again.

"Bad, bad, *bad* Bart," she said angrily. "Shall I make him come again?"

"Leave him be," muttered Vic, closing his eyes. "Leave him be where he is. *I* don't want him."

"Oh," she said, "it's hard to make him do things, sometimes. But Daddy Dan can make him do *anything!*"

"Humph!" grunted Vic. He was remembering how, at the master's order, Bart had crouched at his feet in the wood, an unchained murderer hungrily waiting for an excuse to kill. There was something very odd about the people of this house; and it would be a long time before he rid himself of the impression of the cold, steady eyes which had flashed up to him a moment before out of that baby face.

"Joan!" called a voice from beyond, and the soft fiber of it made Vic certain that it belonged to the rider of the black stallion.

"If you're afraid your dad 'll find you here," said Vic, "just you run along."

She was nervously twisting her hands in her dress.

"Daddy Dan 'll know," she whispered without turning. "And—and—he won't let me be afraid—even of him!"

A small hand slipped up, fumbled a bit, found the thumb of Vic Gregg, and closed softly over it. With this to steady her, she waited, facing the door.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

THE PAST

OUT of the darkness of centuries lost,
Lurking in shadows of pent-up fears.
Haunting with memories of things forgot,
Surging up through the tide of years.
Bedimmed by time and human scars,
I meddle my way into minds of men,
Stirring up dream-stuff in hearts that sleep.
In me old age finds its youth again.

Secrets within my bosom are hidden.
Much that is bitter, more that is sweet.
Sailing o'er unchartered seas of oblivion,
Where receding dreams and realities meet.
A shadow of living that began with life,
My long arm shall reach through eternity vast.
The Present—the Future—what visions they guard
To become dreams of mine, for I am the Past.

Helen de Lorenzi.

The Seventh Man

Part II

by Max Brand

Author of "Trailin'," "The Guide to Happiness," "Tiger," etc.

A Sequel to "The Untamed" and "The Night Horseman."

PRECEDING CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RETOLD

VIC GREGG has been doing assessment work on a number of claims in the mountains in order to get money to marry Betty Neal, the school-teacher at the town of Alder. After a hard winter's work, with his task nearly completed, he decides to take a week off to see Betty and talk with his friends. Arrived at the town he finds that Betty has agreed, not knowing he was coming, to go to a dance that night with Blondy Hansen. A quarrel ensues, one word leading to another until both are unreasonably angered, and Vic goes to the saloon and starts to drink. Hansen comes in, and not seeing Vic, speaks of the fact that he is going to take Betty to the dance. Vic, in a rage, calls him several names, and Hansen is forced to draw his gun, but Vic being quicker, shoots first and Hansen falls.

Vic takes to the hills, but is wounded by the sheriff, Pete Glass, who is leading the posse in pursuit. He manages to reach the woods, however, but would have been captured but for a stranger, mounted on a black stallion and accompanied by a giant wolf-dog named Bart. The stranger leads the posse astray by a trick. Recovering from a faint Vic finds himself in a cabin attended by a beautiful woman, apparently the wife of the stranger, and a little girl of five or six. He is talking to the latter, trying to find out where he is and who the mysterious people are when he hears the stranger approaching.

CHAPTER VIII.

DISCIPLINE.

A LIGHT step crossed the outer room, with something peculiar in its lightness, as if the heel were not touching the floor, with the effect of the padded fall of the feet of some great cat; there was both softness and the sense of weight. First the wolf-dog pricked his ears and turned toward the door, the pudgy fist closed convulsively over Vic's thumb, and then his rescuer stood in the entrance.

"Hello, partner," called Vic. "I got company, you see. The door blew open and I asked your little girl in."

"I told you not to come here," said the other. Vic felt the child tremble, but there was no burst of excuses. "She didn't want to come," he urged. "I kep' askin' her."

The emotionless eye of "Daddy Dan" held upon Joan. "I told you not to come," he said. Joan swallowed in mute agony, and the wolf-dog slipped to the side of the master and licked his hand as though in dumb intercession. The blood ran coldly in the veins of Gregg, as if he saw a fist raised to strike the little girl.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for October 1.

"You go out."

She went swiftly, at that, sidled past her father with her eyes lifted, fascinated, and so out the door where she paused an instant to flash back a wistful appeal. Nothing but silence, and then her feet pattering off into the outer rom.

"Maybe you better go keep her company, Bart," said the father, and at this sign of relenting Vic felt his tensed muscles relaxing; the wolf whined softly and glided through the door.

"You feeling better?"

"Like a hoss off green feed. I been lyin' here drinkin' up the sunshine."

The other stood beside the open window, and there he canted his head, his glance far off and intent.

"D'you hear?" he asked, turning sharply.

There was a fierce eagerness in his face.

"Hear what?"

"It's spring," he murmured, without answering more directly than this, and Vic felt that the other had changed again, grown understandable. Nevertheless, the shock of that sudden alteration at the window kept him watching his host with breathless interest. Whatever it was that the strange fellow heard, a light had gleamed in his eyes for a moment. As he sauntered back toward the bed just a trace of it lingered about him, a hint of sternness.

"Spring?" answered Gregg. "Yep, I smelled spring a few days back, and I started out to find some action. You can see for yourself that I found it, partner." He stirred uneasily, but it was necessary that the story should be told lest it reach the ears of this man from another source. It was one thing to shelter a fugitive from justice whose crime was unknown, perhaps trifling, but it might be quite another story if this gentle, singular man learned that his guest was a new-made murderer. Better that he should learn the tale now and form his prejudices in favor of Gregg. "I'll tell you the whole story," he began.

But the other shrugged his shoulders.

"You leave the story be," he said, and there was something in the quiet firmness of his manner which made it impossible for Vic to continue. "You're here, and you're hurt, and you need a pile of rest. That's about enough story for me."

Vic put himself swiftly in the place of the other. Suppose that he and Betty Neal should have a cabin off in the mountains like this, how would they receive a wounded fugitive from justice? As unquestioningly as this? In a surge of gratitude he looked mistily toward his host.

"Stranger," he said, "you're white. Damned white. That's all. My name's Vic Gregg, and I come from—"

"Thanks," cut in the other. "I'm glad to know your name, but in case anybody might be askin' me I wouldn't care to know where you come from." He smiled. "I'm Dan Barry."

It had to be a left-handed shake on the part of Vic, a thing of which he often thought in the days that followed; but now he sent his memory hunting.

"Seems like I've heard your name before," he murmured. "I dunno where. Were you ever around Alder, Barry?"

"No." His manner suggested that the topic might as well be closed. He reached over and dropped his hand lightly on the forehead of Vic. A tingling current flowed from it into the brain of the wounded man.

"Your blood's still a bit hot," he added. "Lie quiet and don't even think. You're safe here. They ain't a thing goin' to get at you. Not a thing. You'll stay till you get ready to leave. S'-long. I'll see that you get something to eat."

He went out with that unusual, padding step which Vic had noticed before and closed the door softly behind him. In spite of that barrier Gregg could hear the noises from the next room quite clearly, as some one brought in wood and dropped it on a stone hearth, rattling. He fell into a pleasant doze, just stretching his body now and then to enjoy the coolness of the sheets, the delicious sense of being cared for, and the returning strength in his muscles. Through that haze he heard voices, presently, which called him back to wakefulness.

"That ought to be good for him. Take it in, Kate."

"I shall. Dan, what has Joan done?"

"She went in there. I told her to leave him alone."

"But she says he asked her to come in—said he would take the blame."

"I told her not to go."

"Poor baby! She's outside, now, weeping her eyes out on Bart's shoulder, and he's trying to comfort her."

It was purer English than Vic was accustomed to hear, even from his schoolmistress; but more than the words, the voice surprised him — the low, controlled voice of a woman of gentle blood. He turned his head and looked out the window, baffled. Far above, shooting out of sight, went the slope of a mountain, a cliff shining in the slant sun of the afternoon here, a tumbled slide of rocks and débris there, and over the shoulder of this mountain he saw white-headed monsters stepping back in range beyond range.

Why should a girl of refinement choose the isolation of such a place as this for her home? It was not the only strange thing about this household, however, and he would dismiss conjectures until he was once more on his feet.

She was saying: "Won't you speak to her now?"

A little pause. Then: "No, not until evenin'."

"Please, Dan."

"She's got to learn."

A little exclamation of unhappiness and then the door moved open; Vic found himself looking up to the face with the golden hair which he remembered out of his nightmare. She nodded to him cheerily.

"I'm so happy that you're better," she said. "Dan says that the fever is nearly gone."

She then rested a large tray she carried on the foot of the bed, and Vic discovered, to his great content, that it was not hard to meet her eyes. Usually girls embarrassed him, but he recognized so much of Joan in the features of the mother that he felt well acquainted at once.

Motherhood, surely, sat as lightly on her shoulders as fatherhood did on Dan Barry, yet he felt a great pity as he looked at her, this flowerlike beauty lost in the rocks and snow with only one man near her. She was like music played without an audience except senseless things.

"Yep, I'm a lot better," he answered; "but it sure makes me terrible sorry, ma'am, that I got your little girl in trouble. Mostly, it was my fault."

She waved away all need of apology.

"Don't think an instant about that, Mr. Gregg. Joan needs a great deal of disciplining." She laughed a little. "She has so much of her father in her, you see. Now, are you strong enough to lift yourself higher in the pillows?"

They managed it between them, for he was weaker than he thought, and when he was padded into position with cushions, she laid the tray across his knees. His head swam at sight of it. Forty-eight hours of fasting had sharpened his appetite, and the loaded tray whetted a razor edge, for a great bowl of broth steamed forth an exquisite fragrance on one side, and beside it she lifted a napkin to let him peek at a slice of venison steak.

Then there was butter, yellow as the gold for which he had been digging all winter, and real cream for his coffee — a whole pitcher of it—and snowy bread. Best of all, she did not stay to embarrass him with her watching while he ate, since above all things in the world a hungry man hates observation when the board is spread.

Afterward, consuming sleep rippled over him from his feet to his eyes, to his brain. He partially roused when the tray was removed, and the pillows slipped from under his back; but with a vague understanding that expert hands were setting the bed in order, his senses fled once more.

Hours and hours later he opened his eyes in utter darkness with a thin, sweet voice still ringing in his ears. He could not place himself until he turned his head and saw a meager, broken, rectangular line of light which was the door, and immediately afterward the voice cried: "Oh, Daddy Dan! And what did the wolf do then?"

"I'm comin' to that, Joan; but don't you talk about wolves so loud or old Black Bart 'll think you're talkin' about him. See him lookin' at you now?"

"But please go on. I won't say one little word."

The man's voice began again, softly, so that not a word was audible to Gregg; he heard the crackle of burning logs upon the hearth; saw the rectangle of light flicker; caught a faint scent of woodsmoke; and then he slept once more.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LONG ARM OF THE LAW.

FROM the first the wound healed rapidly, for Vic's blood was perfectly pure, the mountain air a tonic which strengthened him, and his food and care of the best. The high-powered rifle-bullet whipped cleanly through his shoulder, breaking no bone and tearing no ligament, and the flesh closed swiftly. Even Vic's mind carried no burden to oppress him in care for the future or regret for the past, for if he occasionally remembered the limp body of Hansen on the floor of Captain Lorrimer's saloon, he could shrug the picture into oblivion.

It had been fair fight, man to man, with all the odds in favor of Blondy, who had been allowed to pull his gun first. If Vic thought about the future at all, it was with a blind confidence that some time, and in some unrevealed way, he would get back to Alder and marry Betty Neal. In the meantime, as the days of the spring went mildly by, he was up and about, and very soon there was only a little stiffness in his right arm to remind him of Pete Glass and the dusty roan.

He spent most of his time close to the cabin, for though he had forgotten the world, there was no decisive proof that the world would forget him half so easily; that was not the way of the sheriff. He had been known to spend years in the hunt for a single misdoer, and Vic had no care to wander out where he might be seen.

Besides, it was very pleasant about the cabin. The house itself was built solidly, roomily, out of logs hewn on the timbered slopes above and dragged down to this little plateau. Three mountains, to the north, south, and west, rolled back and up, cutting away the sunlight in the early afternoon; but at this point the quick slopes put out shoulders and made, among them, a comfortable bit of rolling ground, deep soiled and fertile.

Here, so Kate Barry assured him, the wild flowers came even earlier than they did in the valley so far below them, and to be sure when Vic first walked from the house he found the meadow aflame with color except for the space covered by the truck-garden and the corral. In that enclosure he found Grey Molly fenced away from the black with several other horses of commoner blood, for the stallion, he learned, recognized no fraternity of horseflesh, but killed what he could reach. Grey Molly was quite recovered from her long run, and she greeted him in her familiar way, with ears flattened viciously.

He might have stayed on here quite happily for any space of time, but more and more Vic felt that he was an intruder; he sensed it, rather than received a hint of word or eye. In the first place the three were complete in themselves, a triangle of happiness without need of another member for variety or interest.

It was plain at a glance that the girl was whole-heartedly happy, and whatever incongruity lay between her and these rough mountains he began to understand that her love for Barry and the child made ample amends. As for the other two, he always thought of them in the same instant, for if the child had her eyes and her hair from her mother, she had her nature from the man.

They were together constantly—on walks up the mountain, when she rode Black Bart up the steep places; on dips into the valley, when he carried her before him on the stallion. She had the same soft voice, the same quick, furtive ways, the same soundless laughter, at times; and when Barry sat in the evening, as he often did for hours, staring at empty air, she would climb on his knee, place his unresisting arm around her, and lie looking up into his face, sharing his silences.

Sometimes Vic wondered if the young mother were not troubled, made a little jealous by this perfect companionship; but he never found a trace of it. It was she, finally, who made him determine to leave

as soon as his shoulder muscles moved with perfect freedom, for as the days slipped past he felt that she grew more and more uneasy, and her eyes had a way of going from him to her husband as though she believed their guest a constant danger to Barry. Indeed, to some small extent he *was* a danger, for the law might deal hardly with a man who took a fugitive out of the very grip of its hand.

By a rather ironical chance, on the very morning when he decided that he must start his journey the next day but one, Vic learned that he must not linger even so long as that. Pete Glass and the law had not forgotten him, indeed, nearly so well as he had forgotten the law and Pete Glass, for as he sat in his room filling a pipe after breakfast, the voice of Barry called him out, and he found his host among the rocks which rimmed the southern end of the plateau, in front of the house.

To the north the ground fell away smoothly, rolled down to the side of the mountain, and then dipped easily to the valley—the only direction from which the cabin was accessible, though here the grade was possible for a buckboard. To the south the plateau ended in a drop that angled sharply down, almost a cliff in places, and from this point of vantage the eye carried nameless miles down the river.

"Are them friends of yours?" asked Dan Barry, as he stood among these rocks. "Take a long look." And he handed a strong pair of field-glasses to Gregg.

The latter peered over the dizzy edge. Down there, in the very act of fording the river to get to their side of it, he marked five horsemen — no, six, for he almost missed the leader of the troop, a dusty figure which melted into the background. All the terror of the first flight rushed back on Vic Gregg. He stood palsied, not in fear of that posse, but at the very thought of pursuit.

"There's only one way," he stammered at length. "I'll—Dan, give me a hand to get a saddle on Grey Molly and I'll laugh at 'em yet. Damn 'em!"

"What you goin' to do?" It was the same unhurried voice which had spoken to Vic on the day of the rescue, and it irritated him in the same manner now. Kate had come running from the house with her apron fluttering.

"I'm going down that slope to the north," said Vic, "and I'll get by 'em hell-bent-for-election. Once I show my heels to that lot they're done!"

He talked as much to restore his courage as from confidence, for if the posse sighted him going down that slope on the grey it would take a super-horseman and a super-horse to escape before they closed the gap. Barry considered the situation with a new gleam in his eye.

"Wait a minute," he said, as Vic started toward the corral. "That way you got planned is a good way—to die. You listen to me."

But here Kate broke in on them. "Dan, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to take the grey and go down the slope. I'm going to lead 'em off Vic's trail," said Barry quietly; but it seemed to Vic that he avoided his wife's eye.

The voice of Betty Neal, Vic knew, would have risen shrill at a time like this. Kate spoke even more low than usual, but there was a thing in her voice that struck a tremor through Gregg. "If it's death for him, what is it for you?"

"Nothing at all. If they see me and head for me before the way's clear, I'll let 'em come up and see they have the wrong man. If I get the chance, I'll lead 'em away. And Vic, you'll hit between those two mountains—see 'em?—and cut across country. No hoss could carry you there, except Satan, and you couldn't ride him. You'll have to go on foot; but they'll never look for you on that side. When you get to the easy goin', down in the valley, buy a hoss and hit for the railroad."

Kate turned on Vic, trembling.

"Are you going to let him do it?" she asked. "Are you going to let him do it again?"

He had seen a certain promise of escape held before him the moment before, but pride made him throw that certainty away.

"Not in a million years," he answered. "I—"

"You'll do what I say, and you'll start now. I got a better idea than that. If you

head just over the side of that north mountain you'll find a path that a hoss can follow. It won't take you clear away from them down below; but there ain't a chance in ten that they'll come that way. Take my old brown hoss with the white face. He'll carry you safe."

Vic hesitated. The fierce eyes of Kate were on him, and with all his soul he wanted to play the man; but liberty was sweet —sweeter than ever to Vic She seemed to give him up as he stood there with his heart in his throat; she turned back to Barry.

"Dan!" she pleaded.

She had not touched him, but he made a vague gesture as though brushing away a restraining hand. She cried: "If you come close to them—if they start shooting—you might want to fight back—"

"They shot before," he answered, "and I didn't fire once."

"But the second time, Dan? There may be danger."

To be sure, there would be danger in it; but as Barry himself had said, if the way was closed to him he could surrender to them, and they could not harm him. Vic tried in vain to understand this overmastering terror in the girl, for she seemed more afraid of what Dan might do to the posse than what the posse might do to Dan.

"This ain't a day for fightin'," said Dan, and he waved toward the mountains. It was one of those misty spring days when the sun raises a vapor from the earth and the clouds blow low around the upper peaks; every ravine was poured full of blue shadow, and even high up the slopes, where patches of snow had melted, grass glimmered, a tender green among the white. "This ain't a day for fighting," he repeated.

A shrill, quavering neigh, like the whinny of a galloping horse, rang from beyond the house, and Vic saw the black stallion racing up and down his corral. Back and forth he wove, then raced straight for the bars, flashed above them, and stood free beyond, with the sunshine trembling on him. He seemed to pause, wondering what to do with his new freedom, then he came at a loose gallop for the master. Not Satan alone, for now Black Bart slid across the plateau like a shadow, weaving among the boulders, and came straight toward Barry. Vic himself felt a change—a sort of uneasy happiness; he breathed it with the air. The very sunlight was electric. He saw Kate run close to Barry.

"If you go this time you'll never come back, Dan!"

The black stallion swung up beside them, and as he halted his hoofs knocked a rattling spray of pebbles ahead. On the other side of the woman and the man the wolf-dog ran uneasily here and there, trying to watch the face of the master which Kate obscured.

"I ain't goin' far. I just want to get a hoss runnin' under me enough to cut a wind."

"Even Satan and Bart feel what I feel. They came without being called. They never do that unless there's danger ahead. What can I do to convince you? Dan, you'll drive me mad!"

He made no answer, and if the girl wished him to stay, now seemed the time for persuasion; but she gave up the argument suddenly. She turned away, and Vic saw in her face the same desperate, helpless look as that of a boy who cannot swim beyond his depth in the river. There was no sign of tears; they might come afterward.

What had come over them? This desperation in Kate, this touch of anxiety in the very horse and the wolf-dog? Vic forgot his own danger while he stared, and it seemed to him that the spark of change had come from Barry. There was something in his eyes which Vic found hard to meet.

"The moment you came I knew you brought bad luck with you!" cried Kate. "He brought you in bleeding. He saved you, and came in with blood on his hands, and I guessed at the end. Oh, I wish you—"

"Kate!" broke in Barry.

She dropped upon one of the stones and buried her face in her hands, and Dan paid no more attention to her.

"Hurry up," he said. "They're across the river."

And Vic gave up the struggle, for the tears of Kate made him think of Betty Neal, and he followed Dan toward the cor-

ral. Around them the stallion ran like a hunting dog eager to be off.

CHAPTER X.

ONE TRAIL ENDS.

"I'LL keep Grey Molly for you, Vic," said Barry, when they sat their horses outside the corral. "I'll keep her like she was Satan."

Gregg looked her over sadly. There had been no pitch in her when Barry swung into the saddle, and that was a thing without precedent in Molly's history; moreover, she stood perfectly still now, with none of her usual cat-like side-steps and throwing of the head. Altogether he felt that her new rider had the mare in hand more perfectly than ever he had done, and he was troubled even as he would have been at the sight of Betty Neal in the arms of another man; it was desertion, fickleness.

"Dan," he said hoarsely, "I know what you've done for me, and I know what you're doin' now." He took the slender hand of the other in his own big paw. "If the time comes when I can pay you back, so help me God—"

"Oaths don't do no good," cut in Barry without a trace of emotion. He added frankly: "It ain't altogether for your sake. Those gents down there have played tag once with me, and now I'd like to play tag with them. Molly's fresh to-day."

He was already loking over his shoulder while he spoke, as if his mind were even then at work upon the posse.

"S'-long."

"S'-long, partner. Good luck."

So they parted, and Vic, jogging slowly up the steep path, saw Grey Molly wheeled and sent at a sweeping gallop over the meadow. His heart leaped jealously—and the next moment went out in a flood of gratitude, admiration, as Barry swung off the shoulder of the mountain, waved his hat toward Kate, and dipped at once out of sight.

The shelving ground along which Barry rode sometimes was a broad surface like a spacious, graded road; again it shelved away and opened a view of all the valley. When he reached the first of these places the rider looked back and down and saw the posse skirting rapidly on his side of the river, behind him and close to the cliff.

They rode at an easy lope, and he could see that their heads were bent to watch the ground before them narrowly. Even at this casual gait they would reach the point at which he and the grey must swing onto the floor of the valley with or before him unless he urged Molly to top speed. He must get there at a sufficient distance from them to escape close rifle fire, and certainly beyond pointblank revolver range; accordingly he raised a little, throwing his weight more into the stirrups and over the withers of the mare. This brought greater poundage on her forehead and made her apt to stumble or actually miss her step; but it increased her running power.

The gathering of the reins, the touch of his hand on her neck, the soft warning of his voice, sent Grey Molly out at full speed. Now she floundered as her foot struck a loose stone, now she veered sharply and wide to escape a boulder, now she cleared a gulley with a long leap, and riding high as he was, bent forward out of balance to escape observation from below, it was only a miracle of horsemanship that kept him in the saddle; yet he jockeyed her along with as perfect ease and precision as if she were straining against time on a smooth racetrack. He poised himself with such certainty in the stirrups that Grey Molly seemed to be carrying no weight, but only a clinging intelligence that sent her on to stronger efforts.

At this speed he was sure to reach the valley safely in front unless the posse caught sight of him on the way and gave chase, and Barry counted on that instinct in hunting men which makes them keep their eyes low—the same sense which leads a searcher to look first under the bed and last of all at the wall and ceiling. Once more, as he neared his goal, he looked back and down, and there came the six horsemen, their quirts swinging, their hat-brims blown straight up as they raced at full speed. They had seen the grey and they rode for blood.

The outstretched neck of Grey Molly,

her flattened ears, the rapid clangor of her hoofs on the rocks, seemed to indicate that she already was doing her uttermost, and if Vic Gregg had been in the saddle he would have let her go on without urging in spite of the danger that galloped toward them along the valley floor. Even now their pace endangered the neck of the rider at every stride, but after that glimpse of the pursuit a change came in Barry.

He crouched a little lower over the pommel, his hand was on the reins just behind her head, his voice was near her, speaking softly, quickly, and she responded as a stout-hearted thoroughbred answers a challenge from the rear in the homestretch.

The path wound in leisurely curves, now, but there was a straight cut down a slide of gravel, a dangerous slope even in firm ground, a terrible angle with those loose pebbles underfoot, and the certainty of death, it seemed, to take the slide at a gallop. Yet this was a time for chance taking, or else that race of Molly's would go for nothing. Swiftly the posse closed, and already the dusty man on the roan rode with his revolver balanced for the snap shot. The next instant his gun swung down, he actually reined up in astonishment; for the fugitive had flung himself far back against the cantle and sent Grey Molly at the slide. It was not a mater of running as the mare shot over the brink.

It was only a question of keeping her feet, and Molly sat back on her haunches, braced her forelegs, and went down like an avalanche. Over the rush and roar of the pebbles, over the yell of wonder from the pursuers, she heard the voice of her rider, a clear and steady voice, and the tautened reins telegraphed to her bewildered mind the wish of the man.

She struck the level with stunning force, toppled, nearly fell, and then straightened along her course in a staggering gallop. Started from its nice balance by the rush of stones they loosened, a ten-ton rock came toppling after, leaped up from the valley floor like a live thing, and then thundered away toward the river.

Grey Molly, finding her legs once more, began to stretch into full speed. She had drawn away from these same horses on that race out of Murphy's Pass; she had done that under the crushing impost of Gregg's weight, and with this lighter rider who clung like a part of her, who gave perfectly to the rhythm of her gallop, she fairly walked away from the posse. Once, twice and again the gun spoke from the hand of Pete Glass; but it was the taking of a long last chance rather than a sign of closing on his chase. In ten minutes Grey Molly dipped out of sight among the hills.

There were patches of firm sand and grassy spots where the hoof prints showed clearly; but again came stretches of slaty rock which showed not a mark, or beds of gravel where old and new trails inextricably tangled. Barry took faultless advantage of all these natural aids, and as soon as he was once fairly out of view he struck a winding course which doubled back and forth among the hills like an enormous lariat flung heedlessly on the ground.

Sometimes he rode straight ahead; sometimes he shot off at right angles from his main course; sometimes he even doubled back; and every time he altered his course it was in a patch of country where the trail faded almost out of view. Consequently the posse had to stop a dozen times in the first five miles to cut for trail, spreading in a loose line and riding in circles from the point where the sign went out.

From several points of vantage Barry looked back and watched them, smiling to himself. In ordinary country his tactics would not have troubled so expert a trailer as Pete Glass, who read a sign as another might read a printed page; but this region was enough to baffle the eye of an eagle and the nose of a bloodhound.

After the first hour Barry could have cut away cross country with little fear of discovery from the sheriff, but he seemed in no hurry to escape. Sometimes he dismounted and looked to his cinches and talked to the horse. Grey Molly listened with pricking ears and often canted her head to one side as though she strove to understand the game.

A game it was, as he had said to Vic when they parted, with the rather essential difference that in this pastime one was tagged with a forty-five caliber chunk of

lead and was quite apt to remain "it" for the remainder of eternity. Yet as that game went on Barry dropped further and further back toward the posse, much as the fastest runner in the schoolyard loiters just out of reach of his pursuers, racing by fits and starts. The danger fascinated him, like the cliff which tempts the climber to leap into space. He began to grow flushed; a peculiar yellow gleam altered his brown eyes; and now he insisted on coming back into view of the others time and again.

Once he whistled high and shrill as a hawk's scream from the top of a bluff while the posse labored through a ravine below. He saw the guns flash out, and waited; he heard the sing of the bullets around him, and the spatter of lead on a solid rock-face just beneath him; he listened till the deep echoes spoke from the gulch, and then waved his hat and disappeared, climbing back into the saddle.

This was almost defeating the purpose of his play, for if he came that close again they would probably make out that he was by no means the figure of Vic Gregg. Accordingly, since he had now drawn them well away from Vic's line of escape, and since the evening lay not far off, he turned his back reluctantly on the posse and struck straight across the hills.

He kept on for the better part of an hour before he doubled and swung back in a wide circle toward his cabin; he had laid out a course which the wise sheriff could follow until dark and be none the wiser; and if Pete Glass were the finest trailer who ever studied sign he would never be able to read the tokens of the return ride. Accordingly, with all this well in mind, he brought Grey Molly to a full halt and gazed around, utterly stunned by surprise, when, half-way up the valley, a rifle spoke small but sharp from one side, and a bullet clipped the rocks not the length of the horse away. Another shot rang before he understood. When he cut straight away across the country he had indeed left a baffling trail, a trail so dim, in fact, that Pete Glass had wisely given it up and taken the long chance by cutting back to the point from which the hunt began. So their paths crossed.

Barry spoke sharply to the mare and loosed the reins, but she started into a full gallop too late. There came a brief hum, a thudding blow, and Grey Molly pitched forward, head over heels. The sound of the third shot reached them as she lay sprawling.

CHAPTER XI.

A NEW TRAIL BEGINS.

IF he had been an ordinary rider, sitting heavily far back in the saddle, at the end of a long ride, Barry would either have been flung clear and smashed horribly against the rocks, or, more likely, he would have been entangled in the stirrups and crushed to death instantly by the weight of his horse; but he rode always lightly poised and when the mare pitched forward his feet were already clear of the stirrups. He landed, catlike, on hands and feet, unhurt.

It had been a long shot, a lucky hit even for a marksman of the sheriff's caliber, and now the six horsemen streamed over a distant hilltop and swept into the valley to take their quarry dead, or half dead, from his fall. However, that approaching danger was nothing in the eye of Barry. He ran to the fallen mare and caught her head in his arms. She ceased her struggles to rise as soon as he touched her and whinnied softly. The left foreleg lay twisted horribly beneath her, broken. Grey Molly had run her last race, and as Barry kneeled, holding the brave head close to him, he groaned, and looked away from her eyes. It was only an instant of weakness, and when he turned to her again he was drawing his gun from its holster.

Her chin was on his shoulder; the quiver of pain in her nostrils ended as he spoke; and while the fingers of his left hand trailed caressingly across her forehead, his right carried the muzzle to her temple.

"Brave Molly, good girl," he whispered, "they'll pay for you a death for a death and a man for a hoss—" The yellow which had glinted in his eyes during the run was a fire now. "It ain't far; only a step to go; and then you'll be where they ain't any saddles, nor any spurs to gall you,

Molly; but just pastures that's green all year, and nothin' to do but loaf in the sun and smell the wind. Here's good luck to you, girl."

His gun spoke sharp and short, and he laid the limp head reverently on the ground.

It had all happened in very few seconds, and the posse was riding through the river, still a long shot off, when Barry drew his rifle from its case on the saddle. Moreover, the failing light which had made the sheriff's hit so much a matter of luck, was now still dimmer, yet Barry snapped his gun to the shoulder and fired the instant the butt lay in the groove. For another moment nothing changed in the appearance of the riders, then a man leaned out of his saddle and fell full length in the water.

Around him his companions floundered, lifted and placed him on the bank, and then threw themselves from their horses to take shelter behind the first rocks they could find; they had no wish to take chances with a man who could snap-shoot like this in such a light, at such a distance. By the time they were in position their quarry had slipped out of sight and they had only the blackening boulders for targets.

"God A'mighty!" cried Ronicky Joe, "are you goin' to let that murderin' hound-dog get clear off, Pete? Boys, who's with me for a run at him?"

For it was Harry Fisher who had fallen and lay now on the wet bank with his arms flung wide and a red spot rimmed with purple in the center of his forehead; and Fisher was Ronicky Joe's partner.

"You lay where you are," commanded the sheriff, and indeed there had been no rousing response to Ronicky Joe's appeal.

"You yaller quitters," groaned Joe. "Give me a square chance and I'll tackle Vic Gregg alone day or night, on hoss or on foot. Are we five goin' to lay down to him?"

"If that was Vic Gregg," answered the sheriff, slipping over the insult with perfect calm, "I wouldn't of told you to scatter for cover; but that ain't Vic."

"Pete, what in hell are you drivin' at?"

"I say it ain't Vic," said the sheriff. "Vic is a good man with a hoss and a good man with a gun; but he couldn't never ride like the gent over there in the rocks, and he couldn't shoot like him."

He pointed, in confirmation, at the body of Harry Fisher.

"You can rush that hill if you want, but speakin' personal, I ain't ready to die."

A thoughtful silence held the others until Silver Waldron broke it with his deep bass. "You ain't far off, Pete. I done some thinkin' along them lines when I seen him standin' up there over the arroyo wavin' his hat at the bullets. Vic didn't never have the guts for that."

All the lower valley was gray—dark in comparison with the bright peaks above it, before the sheriff rose from his place and led the posse toward the body of Grey Molly. There they found as much confirmation of Pete's theory as they needed, for Vic's silver-mounted saddle was known to all of them, and this was a plain affair which they found on the dead horse. Waldron pushed back his hat to scratch his head.

"Look at them eyes, boys," he suggested. "Molly has been beatin' us all day, and she looks like she's fightin' us still."

The sheriff was not a man of very many words, and surely of little sentiment; perhaps it was the heat of the long chase which now made him take off his hat so that the air could reach his sweaty forehead.

"Gents," he said, "she lived game and she died game. But they ain't no use of wastin' that saddle. Take it off."

And that was Grey Molly's epitaph.

They decided to head straight back for the nearest town with the body of Harry Fisher, and, fagged by the desperate riding of that day, they let their horses go with loose rein, at a walk. Darkness gathered; the last light faded from even the highest peaks; the last tinge of color dropped out of the sky as they climbed from the valley. Now and then one of the horses cleared its nostrils with a snort, but on the whole they went in perfect silence with the short grass silencing the hoofbeats, and never a word passed from man to man.

Beyond doubt, if it had not been for that same silence, if it had not been for the slowness with which they drifted through the dark, what follows could never have

happened. They had crossed a hill, and descended into a very narrow ravine which came to so sharp a point that the horses had to be strung out in single file. The ravine twisted to the right, and then the last men of the procession heard the sheriff call: "Halt, there! Up with your hands, or I'll drill you!" When they swung from side to side, craning their heads to look, they made out a shadowy horseman facing Pete head on. Then the sheriff's voice again: "Gregg, I'm considerable glad to meet up with you."

If that meeting had taken place in any other spot probably Gregg would have taken his chance on escaping through the night, but in this narrow pass he could swing to neither side, and before he could turn the brown horse entirely around the sheriff might pump him full of lead. They gathered in a solemn quiet around him; the irons were already upon his wrists.

"All right, boys," he said, "you've got me, but you'll have to give in that you had all the luck."

A moment after that sharp command in the familiar, dreaded voice of Pete Glass, Vic had been glad that the long flight was over. Eventually this was bound to come. He would go back and face the law, and three men lived to swear that Blondy had gone after his gun first.

"Maybe luck," said the sheriff. "How d'you come back this way?"

"Made a plumb circle," chuckled Gregg. "Rode like a fool not carin' where I hit out for, and the end of it was that it was dark before I'd had sense to watch where the sun went down."

"Kind of cheerful, ain't you?" cut in Ronicky Joe, and his voice was as dry as the crisping leaves in an autumn wind.

"They ain't any call for me to wear crape yet," answered Gregg. "Worst fool thing I ever done was to cut and run for it. The old captain will tell you gents that Blondy went for his gun first—had it clean out of the leather before I touched mine."

He paused, and the silence of those dark figures sank in upon him.

"I got to warn you," said Pete Glass, "that what you say now can be sed ag'in' you later on before the jury."

"My God boys!" burst out Vic. "D'you think I'm a plain, low-down, murderin' snake? Harry, ain't you got a word for me? Are you like the rest of 'em?"

No voice answered.

"Harry," said Ronicky, "why don't you speak to him?"

It was a brutal thing to do, but Ronicky was never a gentle sort in his best moments; he scratched a match and held it so that under the spluttering light Gregg found himself staring into the dead face of Harry Fisher. And he could not turn his eyes away until the match burned down to Ronicky's finger-tip and then dropped in a streak of red to the ground.

Then the sheriff spoke, cold and hard.

"Partner," he said, "in the old days, maybe your line of talk would do some good, but not now. You picked that fight with Blondy. You knew you was faster on the draw, and Hansen didn't have a chance. He was the worst shot in Alder and everybody in Alder knew it. You picked that fight and you killed your man, and—you're goin' to hang for it."

Another hush; no murmur of assent or dissent.

"But they's one way out for you, Gregg, and I'm layin' it clear. We wanted you bad, and we got you; but they's another man we want a lot worse. A pile! Gregg, take me where I can find the gent what done for Harry Fisher and you'll never stand up in front of a jury. You got my word on that."

CHAPTER XII.

THE CRISIS.

THOSE mountains above the Barry cabin were, as he told Vic Gregg, inaccessible to men on horseback except by one path, yet there was a single class of travelers who roamed at will through far more difficult ground than this. Speaking in general, where a man can go a burro can go, and where a burro can go he usually manages to carry his pack.

He crawls up a ragged down-pitch of rocks that comes dangerously close to the perpendicular; he walks securely along a

crumbling ledge with half his body over a thousand yards of emptiness. Therefore the prospectors with their burros have combed the worst mountains of the West and it was hardly a surprise to Kate Barry when she saw two men come down the steepest slope above the cabin with two little pack-animals scrambling and sliding before them.

It was still some time before nightfall, but the sun had dropped out of sight fully an hour ago, and now the western mountains were blackening against a sky whose thin, clear blue grew yellow toward evening.

Against that dark mass of the mountainside she could not make out the two travelers clearly, so she shaded her eyes and peered up, high up. The slope was so sheer that if one of the four figures lost footing it would come crashing to her very feet. When they saw her and shouted down the sound fell as clearly as if they had called from the cabin, yet they had a good half-hour's labor between that greeting and the moment they came out on the level before Kate.

From the instant they called she had remained in motionless, deep thought, and when they came now into full view, she cried out joyously, "Buck, oh, Buck!" and ran toward them. Even the burros stopped, and the men stood statuelike; it is rarely enough that one finds a human being in those mountains, almost an act of Providence that leads to a house, and a miracle when the trail crosses the path of a friend. The prospectors came out of their daze with a shout and rushed to meet her. Each of them had her by a hand, wringing it; they talked all together in a storm of words.

"Kate, I'm dreamin'! Dear old Buck! Have you forgotten me? Lee Haines! I should say not. Don't pay any attention to him. Five years. And I've been hungerin' to see you all that. Where have you been? Everywhere! But this is the best thing I've seen. Come in. Wait till we get these packs off the poor little devils. Oh, I'm so glad to see you; so glad! Hurry up, Lee. Your fingers asleep? How long have you been out? Five months. Then you're hungry. We've just ate. But a piece of pie? Pie? I've been dreamin' of pie!"

A fire already burned in the big living-room of the cabin, for at this season, at such an altitude, the shadows were always cold, and around the fire they gathered, each of the men with half of a huge pie before him.

They were such as one might expect that mountain region to produce — big, gaunt, hard-muscled. They had gone unshaven for so long that their faces were clothed not with an unsightly stubble, but with strong, short beard that gave them a certain grim dignity and made their eyes seem sunken. They were opposite types, which is usually the case when two men strike out together.

Buck Daniels was black-haired, with an ugly, shrewd face and a suggestion of rather dangerous possibilities of swift action; but Lee Haines was a great bulk of a man, with tawny beard, handsome, in a leonine fashion, more poised than Daniels, fitted to crush. The sharp glance of Buck flitted here and there; in ten seconds he knew everything in the room; the steady blue eye of Lee Haines went leisurely from place to place and lingered; but both of them stared at Kate as if they could not have enough of her.

They talked without pause while they ate. A stranger in the room would have sealed their lips in utter taciturnity, but here they sat with a friend, five months of loneliness and labor behind them, and they gossiped like girls.

Into the jangle of talk cut a thin, small voice from outside, a burst of laughter. Then, "Bart, you *silly* dog!" And Joan stood at the open door with her hand buried in the mane of the wolf-dog. The fork of Buck Daniels stopped half-way to his lips and Lee Haines straightened until the chair groaned.

They spoke together, hushed voices, "Kate!"

"Come here, Joan!" Her face glistened with pride, and Joan came forward with wide eyes, tugging Black Bart along in a reluctant progress.

"It ain't possible!" whispered Buck Daniels. "Honey, come here and shake hands with your Uncle Buck." The gesture called forth deep-throated warning

from Bart, and he caught back his hand with a start.

"It's always that way," said Kate, half amused, half vexed. "Bart won't let a soul touch her when Dan isn't home. Good old Bart, go away, you foolish dog! Don't you see these are friends?"

He cringed a little under the shadow of the hand which waved him off, but his only answer was a silent baring of the teeth.

"You see how it is? I'm almost afraid to touch her myself when Dan's away; she and Bart bully me all day long."

In the mean time the glance of Joan had cloyed itself with a sufficient examination of the strangers, and now she turned back toward the door and the meadow beyond.

"Bart!" she called softly. The sharp ears of the dog quivered; he came to attention with a start. "Look! Get it for me!"

One loud scraping of his claws on the floor as he started, and Black Bart went like a bolt through the door with Joan scrambling after him, screaming with excitement; from the outside they heard the cry of a frightened squirrel, and then its angry chattering from a place of safety up a tree.

"Shall I call her back again?" asked Kate.

"Not if Bart comes with her," answered Lee Haines. "I've seen enough of him to last me a while."

"Well, we'll have her to ourselves when Dan comes; of course Bart leaves her to tag around after Dan."

"When is he comin' back?" asked Buck with polite interest.

"Any time. I don't know. But he's always here before it's completely dark."

The glance of Buck Daniels flicked over to Lee Haines, exchanged meanings with him, and came back to Kate.

"Terribly sorry," he said, "but I s'pose we'll have to be on our way before it's plumb dark."

"Go so soon as that? Why, I won't let you."

"I—" began Haines, fumbling for words.

"We got to get down in the valley before it's dark," filled in Buck.

Suddenly she laughed, frankly, happily.

"I know what you mean, but Dan is changed; he isn't the same man he used to be."

"Yes?" queried Buck without conviction.

"You'll have to see him to believe; Buck, he doesn't even whistle any more."

"What?"

"Only goes about singing now."

The two men exchanged glances of such astonishment that Kate could not help but notice and flush a little.

"Well," murmured Buck, "Bart doesn't seem to have changed much from the old days."

She laughed slowly, letting her mind run back through such happiness as they could not understand, and when she looked up she seemed to debate whether or not it would be worth while to let them in on the delightful secret. The moment she dwelt on the burning logs they gazed at her and then to each other with utter amazement, as if they sat in the same room with the dead come to life. No care of motherhood had marked her face, but on the white, even forehead was a sign of peace; and drifting over her hands and on the white apron across her lap the firelight pooled dim gold, the wealth of contentment.

"If you'd been here to-day you would have seen how changed he is. We had a man with us whom Dan had taken while he was running from a posse, wounded, and kept him here until he was well, and—"

"That's Dan," murmured Lee Haines. "He's gold all through when a man's in trouble."

"Shut up, Lee," cut in Buck. He sat far forward in his chair, drinking up her story. "Go on."

"This morning we saw the same posse skirting through the valley and knew that they were on the old trail. Dan sent Gregg over the hills and rode Vic's horse down so that the posse would mistake him, and he could lead them out of the way. I was afraid, terribly. I was afraid that if the posse got close and began shooting Dan would—"

She stopped; her eyes begged them to understand.

"Go on," said Lee Haines, shuddering slightly. "I know what you mean."

"But I watched him ride down the slope," she cried joyously, "and I saw the posse close on him—almost on top of him when he reached the valley. I saw the flash of their guns. I saw them shoot. I wasn't afraid that Dan would be hurt, for he seems to wear a charm against bullets—I wasn't much afraid of that, but I dreaded to see him turn and go back through that posse like a storm. But"—she caught both hands to her breast and her bright face tilted up—"even when the bullets must have been whistling around him he didn't look back. He rode straight on and on, and out of view, and I knew"—her voice broke with emotion—"oh, Buck, I knew that he had won, and I had won; that he was safe forever; that there was no danger of him ever slipping back into that terrible other self; I knew that I'd never again have to dream of that whistling in the wind; I knew that he was ours—Joan's and mine—"

"By God," broke out Buck, "I'm happier than if you'd found a gold mine, Kate! It don't seem no ways possible—but if you seen that with your own eyes, it's true."

"I've been almost afraid to be happy all these years," she said, "but now I want to sing and cry at the same time. My heart is so full that it's overflowing, Buck."

She brushed the tears away and smiled at them.

"Tell me all about yourselves. Everything. You first, Lee. You've been longer away."

He did not answer for a moment, but sat with his head fallen, watching her thoughtfully. Women had been the special curse in Lee Haines's life; they had driven him to the crime that sent him West into outlawry long years before; through women, as he himself forebode, he would come at last to some sordid, petty end; but here sat the only one he had loved without question, without regret, purely and deeply, and as he watched her, more beautiful than she had been in her girlhood, it seemed, as he heard the fitful laughter of Joan outside, the old sorrow came storming up in him, and the sense of loss.

"What have I been doing?" he murmured at length. He shrugged away his last thoughts. "I drifted about for a while after the pardon came down from the governor. People knew me, you see, and what they knew about me didn't please them. Even to-day Jim Silent and Jim Silent's crew isn't forgotten. Then—don't look at me like that, Kate; no, I played straight all the time—then I ran into Buck, and he and I had tried each other out; we had at least one thing in common"—here he looked at Buck and they both flushed—"and we made a partnership of it. We've been together five years now."

"I knew you could break away, Lee. I used to tell you that."

"You helped me more than you knew," he said quietly.

She smiled and then turned to escape him. "And now you, Buck?"

"Since then we've made a bit of coin punching cows and we've blown it in again prospecting. Blown it in! Kate, we've shot enough powder to lift that mountain yonder, but all we've got is color. You could gild the sky with what we've seen, but we haven't washed enough dust to wear a hole in a tissue-paper pocket. I'll tell you the whole story. Lee packs a jinx with him. But—Haines, did you ever see a lion as big as that?"

The dimness of evening had grown rapidly through the room while they talked, and now the light from the door was far less than the glow of the fire. The yellow flicker picked out a dozen pelts stretching as rugs on the floor or hanging along the wall; that to which Buck pointed was an enormous skin of a mountain lion stretched sidewise, for if it had been hung straight up a considerable portion of the tail must have dragged on the floor. Buck went to examine it. Presently he exclaimed in surprise, and he passed his fingers over it as though searching for something.

"Where was it shot, Kate? I don't find nothin' but this cut that looks like his knife slipped when he was skinnin'."

"It was a knife that killed it."

"What!"

"Don't ask me about it; I see the picture of it in my dreams still. The lion had

dragged the trap into a cave and Bart followed it. Dan went in pushing his rifle before him, but when he tried to fire it jammed."

"Yes?" they cried together.

"Don't ask me the rest!"

They would hardly have let her off so easily if it had not been for the entrance of Joan, who had come back on account of the darkness. Black Bart went promptly to a corner of the hearth and lay down with his head on his paws, and the little girl sat beside him watching the fire, her head leaning wearily on his shoulder. Kate went to the door.

"It's almost night," she said. "Why isn't he here?" She started. "Buck, they couldn't have overtaken Dan?"

Buck Daniels grinned reassuringly.

"Not unless his hoss is a pile of bones; if it has any heart in it, Dan 'll run away from anything on four legs. No call for worryin', Kate. He's simply led 'em a long ways off and waited for evenin' before he doubled back. He'll come back right enough. If they didn't catch him that first run they'll never get the wind of him."

It quieted her for a time, but as the minutes slipped away, as the darkness grew more and more heavy until a curtain of black fell across the open door, they could see that she was struggling to control her trouble, they could see her straining to catch some distant sound. Lee Haines began to talk valiantly, to beguile the waiting time, and Buck Daniels did his share with stories of their prospecting, but eventually more and more often silences came on the group. They began to watch the fire and they winced when a log crackled, or when the sap in a green piece hissed. By degrees they pushed farther and farther back so that the light would not strike so fully upon them, for in some way it became difficult to meet each other's eyes.

Only Joan was perfectly at ease. She played for a time with the ears of Black Bart, or pried open his mouth and made him show the great white fangs, or scratched odd designs on the hearth with pieces of charcoal; but finally she lost interest in all these things and let her head lie on the rough pelt of the wolf-dog, sound asleep. The firelight made her hair a patch of gold.

Black Bart slept soundly, too; that is, as soundly as one of his nature could sleep, for every now and then one of his ears twitched, or he stirred a paw, or an eyelid quivered up. Yet they all started when he jumped from his sleep into full wakefulness; the motion made Joan sit up, rubbing her eyes, and Black Bart reached the center of the room noiselessly. He stood facing the door, motionless.

"It's Dan," cried Kate. "Bart hears him! Good old Bart!"

The dog pointed up his nose, the hair about his neck bristled into a ruff, and out of his quaking body came a sound that seemed to moan and whimper from the distance at first, but drew nearer, louder, packed the room with terror, the long-drawn howl of a wolf.

CHAPTER XIII.

EQUAL PAYMENT.

THEY knew what it meant; even Joan had heard the cry of the lone wolf hunting in the lean time of winter, and of all things sad, all things lonely, all things demoniacal, the howl of a wolf stands alone. Lee Haines reached for his gun, little Joan stood up silent on the hearth, but Kate and Buck Daniels sat listening with a sort of hungry terror as the cry sobbed away to quiet. Then out of the mountains and the night came an answer so thin, so eery, one might have said it was the voice of the mountains and white stars grown audible; it stole on the ear as the pulse of a heart comes to the consciousness.

Truly it was an answer to the cry of the wolf-dog, for in the slender compass it carried the same wail, the same unearthly quality with this great difference, that a thrilling happiness went through it, as if some one walked through the mountains and rejoiced in the unknown terrors. A sob formed in the throat of Kate, and the wolf turned its head and looked at her, and the yellow of things that see in the night swam in its eyes. Lee Haines struck the arm of Buck Daniels.

"Buck, let's get clear of this. Let's start. He's coming."

At the whisper Buck turned a livid face; one could see him gather his strength.

"I stick," he said with difficulty, as though his lips were numb. "She'll need me now."

Lee Haines stood in a moment's indecision, but then settled back in his chair and gripped his hands together. They both sat watching the door as if the darkness were a magnet of inescapable horror. Only Joan, of all in that room, showed no fear after the first moment. Her face was blanched, indeed, but she tilted it up now, smiling; she stole toward the door, but Kate caught the child and gathered her close with strangling force. Joan made no attempt to escape.

"S-sh!" she cautioned, and raised a plump little forefinger. "Munner, don't you hear? Don't you like it?"

As if the sound had turned a corner, it broke all at once clearly over them in a rain of music; a man's whistling. It went out; it flooded about them again like beautiful, cold light. Once again it stopped, and now they sensed, rather than heard, a light, rapid, padding step that approached the cabin. Dan Barry stood in the door, and in that shadowy place his eyes seemed luminous. He no longer whistled, but a spirit went from him which carried the same sense of the untamed, the wild happiness which died out with his smile as he looked around the room.

The brim of his hat curved up, his neckerchief seemed to flutter a little. The wolf-dog reached the threshold in the same instant and stood looking steadily up into the face of the master.

"Daddy Dan!" cried Joan.

She had slipped from the nerveless arms of Kate and now ran toward her father, but here she faltered, there she stopped with her arms slowly falling back to her sides. He did not seem to see her, but looked past her, far beyond every one in the room as he walked to the wall and took down a bridle that hung on a peg. Kate laid her hands on the arms of the chair, but after the first effort to rise, her strength failed.

"Dan!" she said. It was only a whisper, a heart-stopping sound. "Dan!" Her voice rang, then her arms gathered to her, blindly, Joan, who had shrunk back. "What's happened?"

"Molly died."

"Died?"

"They broke her leg."

"The posse!"

"With a long shot."

"What are you going to do?"

"Get Satan. Go for a ride."

"Where?"

He looked about him, troubled, and then frowned.

"I dunno. Out yonder."

He waved his arm. Black Bart followed the turn of the master's body, and switching around in front, continued to stare up into Dan's face.

"You're going back after the posse?"

"No, I'm done with them."

"What do you mean?"

"They paid for Grey Molly."

"You shot one of their—horses?"

"A man."

"God help us!" Then life came to her; she sprang up and ran between him and the door. "You sha'n't go. If you love me!" She was only inches from Black Bart, and the big animal showed his teeth in silent hate.

"Kate, I'm goin'. Don't stand in the door."

Joan, slipping around Bart, stood clinging to the skirts of her mother and watched the face of Dan, fascinated, silent.

"Tell me where you're going. Tell me when you're coming back. Dan, for pity's sake, tell me!"

Loud as a trumpet a horse neighed from the corral. Dan had stood with an uncertain face, but now he smiled.

"D'you hear? I got to go!"

"I heard Satan whinny. But what does that mean? How does that make you go, Dan?"

"Somewhere," he murmured; "something's happening. I felt it on the wind when I was comin' up the pass."

"If you—oh, Dan, you're breaking my heart!"

"Stand out of the door."

"Wait till the morning."

"Don't you see I can't wait?"

"One hour, ten minutes. Buck—Lee Haines—"

She could not finish, but Buck Daniels stepped closer, trying to make a smile grow on his ashen face.

"Another minute, Dan, and I'll tell a man you've forgotten me."

Barry pivoted suddenly as though uneasy at finding something behind him, and Daniels winced.

"Hello, Buck. Didn't see you was here. Lee Haines? Lee, this is fine."

He passed from one to the other and his handshake was only the elusive passage of his fingers through their palms. Haines shrugged his shoulders to get rid of a weight that clung to him; a touch of color came back to his face.

"Look here, Dan. If you're afraid that gang may trail you here and start raising the devil—how many are there?"

"Five."

"I'm as good with a gun as I ever was in the old days. So is Buck. Partner, let's make the showdown together. Stick here with Kate and Joan and Buck and I will help you hold the fort. Don't look at me like that. I mean it. Do you think I've forgotten what you did for me that night in Elkhead? Not in a thousand years. Dan, I'd rather make my last play here than any other place in the world. Let 'em come! We'll salt them down and plant them where they won't grow."

As he talked the pallor quite left him, and the fighting fire blazed in his eyes, he stood lionlike, his feet spread apart as if to meet a shock, his tawny head thrown back, and there was about him a hair-trigger sensitiveness, in spite of his bulk, a nervousness of hand and coldness of glance which characterizes the gun-fighter. Buck Daniels stepped closer, without a word, but one felt that he also had walked into the alliance.

As Barry watched them the yellow which swirled in his eyes flickered away for a moment.

"Why, gents," he murmured, "they ain't any call for trouble. The posse? What's that got to do with me? Our accounts are all squared up."

The two stared dumbly.

"They killed Grey Molly; I killed one of them."

"A horse—for a man?" repeated Lee Haines, breathing hard.

"A life for a life," said Dan simply. "They got no call for complainin'."

Glances of wonder, glances of meaning, flashed back and forth from Haines to Buck.

"Well, then," said the latter, and he took in Kate with a caution from the corner of his eye, "if that's the case, let's sit down and chin for a minute."

Dan stood with his head bowed a little, frowning; two forced, pulled him, and Kate leaned against the wall off in the shadow with her eyes closed, waiting, waiting, waiting through the crisis.

"I'd like to stay and chin with you, Buck—but I got to be off. Out there—in the night—something may happen before mornin'." Black Bart licked the hand of the master and whined. "Easy, boy. We're startin'."

"But the night's just beginnin'," said Buck Daniels genially. "You got a world of time before you, and with Satan to fall back on you don't have to count your minutes. Pull up a chair beside me, Dan, and—"

The latter shook his head, decided. "Buck, I can't do it. Just to sit here"—he looked about him—"makes me feel sort of choked. Them walls are as close—as a coffin."

He was already turning; Kate straightened in the shadow, desperate.

"As a matter of fact, Dan," said Lee Haines suddenly, "we need your help, badly."

"Help?"

The heart of Kate stood in her eyes as she looked at Lee Haines.

"Sit down a minute, Dan, and I'll tell you about it."

Barry slipped into a chair which he had pulled to one side—so that the back of it was toward the wall, and every one in the room was before him.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

The Seventh Man

Part III

by Max Brand

Author of "Trailin'," "The Guide to Happiness," "Tiger," etc.

A Sequel to "The Untamed" and "The Night Horseman."

PRECEDING CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RETOLD

VIC GREGG has been doing assessment work on a number of claims in the mountains in order to get money to marry Betty Neal, the school-teacher at the town of Alder. After a hard winter's work, with his task nearly completed, he decides to take a week off to see Betty and talk with his friends. Arrived at the town he finds that Betty has agreed, not knowing he was coming, to go to a dance that night with Blondy Hansen. A quarrel ensues, one word leading to another until both are unreasonably angered, and Vic goes to the saloon and starts to drink. Hansen comes in, and not seeing Vic, speaks of the fact that he is going to take Betty to the dance. Vic, in a rage, calls him several names, and Hansen is forced to draw his gun, but Vic being quicker, shoots first and Hansen falls.

Vic takes to the hills, but is wounded by Pete Glass, the sheriff leading the posse, and would have been captured but for Dan Barry, who arrives in the nick of time on his big black stallion, Satan, accompanied by his wolf-dog Bart. He spirits Vic away to the cabin hidden deep in the mountains, where he lives with his wife Kate and their little girl Joan, and there nurses him back to health.

Discovering that the posse is still on the trail Dan starts out on Vic's horse, Grey Molly, to again lead them a wild-goose chase while Vic escapes another way. A chance shot kills Grey Molly, and Dan, in revenge, shoots one of the posse, Harry Fisher, and starts for home a-foot. Vic, in the gathering dusk, misses his way, blunders directly into the posse and is captured.

Meantime, at the cabin, visitors arrive; Buck Daniels and Lee Haines, prospecting, having stumbled on the home of their old friends by accident. While they are still there Dan arrives and announces his intention of going for a ride on Satan, and Kate realizes that the spirit of the Untamed is again upon him. She and the others try to dissuade him, and Lee Haines finally prevails on him to wait a little while by telling Dan he and Buck need his help.

CHAPTER XIV.

SUSPENSE.

THE help which Lee Haines wanted, it turned out, was guidance across a difficult stretch of country which he and Buck Daniels wanted to prospect, and while he talked Barry listened uneasily. It was constitutionally impossible for him to say no when a favor was asked of him, and Haines counted heavily on that characteristic; in the mean time Black Bart lay on the hearth with his wistful eyes turned steadily up to the master; and Buck Daniels went to Kate on the farther side of the room.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for October 1.

She sat quivering, alternately crushing and soothing Joan with the strength of her caresses. Buck drew a chair close, with his back half toward the fire.

"Turn around a little, Kate," he cautioned. "Don't let Dan see your face."

She obeyed him automatically.

"Is there a hope, Buck? What have I done to deserve this? I don't want to live; I want to die! I want to die!"

"Steady, steady!" he cut in, and his face was working. "If you keep on like this you'll bust down in a minute or two. And you know what tears do to Dan; he'll be out of this house like a scairt coyote. Brace up!"

She struggled and won a partial control.

"I'm fighting hard, Buck."

"Fight harder still. You ought to know him better than I do. When he's like this it drives him wild to have other folks thinkin' about him."

He looked over to Dan. In spite of the bowed head of the latter as he listened to Haines yarning, he gave an impression of electric awareness to all that was around him.

"Talk soft," whispered Buck. "Maybe he knows we're talkin' about him."

He raised his voice out of the whisper, breaking in on a sentence about Joan, as if this were the tenor of their talk. Then he lowered his tone again.

"Think quick. Talk soft. Do you want Dan kept here?"

"For God's sake, yes."

"Suppose the posse gets him here?"

"We mustn't dodge the law."

They were gaging their voices with the closest precision. Talking like this so close to Barry was like dancing among flasks of nitroglycerine. Once, and once only, Lee Haines cast a desperate eye across to them, begging them to come to his rescue, then he went back to his talk with Dan, raising his voice to shelter the conference of the other two.

"If they come, he'll fight."

"No, he isn't at the fighting pitch yet, I know!"

"If you're wrong they'll be dead men here."

"He sees no difference between the death of a horse and the death of a man. He feels that the law has no score against him. He'll go quietly."

"And we'll find ways of fightin' the law?"

"Yes, but it needs money."

"I've got a stake."

"God bless you, Buck."

"Take my advice."

"What?"

"Let him go, now."

She glanced at him wildly.

"Kate, he's gone already."

"No, no, no!"

"I say he's gone. Look at his eyes."

"I don't dare."

"The yaller is comin' up in 'em. He's wild again."

She shook her head in a mute agony. Buck Daniels groaned softly.

"Then they's goin' to be a small-sized hell started around this cabin before mornin'."

He got up and went slowly back toward the fire. Lee Haines was talking steadily, leisurely, going round and round his subject again and again, and Barry listened with bowed head; but his eyes were fixed upon those of the wolf-dog at his feet. When he grew restless, Haines chained him to the chair with some direct question, yet it was a hard game to play. All this time the posse might be gathering around the cabin; and the forehead of Haines whitened and glistened with sweat.

His voice was the only living thing in the cabin, after a time, sketching his imaginary plans for the benefit of Barry—his voice and the wistful eyes of Joan which kept steadily on Daddy Dan. Something had come between them and lifted a barrier which she could not understand, and with all her aching child's heart she wondered at it.

For the second time that evening the wolf stood up on the hearth, but he was not yet on his feet before Dan was out of his chair and standing close to the wall, where the shadows swallowed him. Lee Haines sat with his lips frozen on the next unspoken word. Two shadows, whose feet made no sound, Black Bart and Dan, glided to the door and peered into the night; then

Barry went back, step by step, until his back was once more to the wall. Not until that instant did the others hear. It was a step which approached behind the house; a loud rap came at the back door.

It was the very loudness of the knock which made Kate draw a breath of relief; if it had been a stealthy tap she would have screamed. He who rapped did not wait for an answer; they heard the door creak open, the sound of a heavy man's step.

"It's Vic," said Dan quietly, and then the door opened which led into the kitchen and the tall form of Gregg entered. He paused there.

"Here I am again, ma'am."

"Good evening," she answered faintly.

He cleared his throat, embarrassed.

"Darned if I didn't play a fool game today—hello, Dan."

The other nodded.

"Rode in a plumb circle and come back where I started." He stepped to the wall and hung up his bridle—the immemorial manner of asking hospitality in the mountain-desert. "Hope I ain't puttin' you out, Kate. I see you got company."

She started, recalled from her thoughts.

"Excuse me, Vic. Vic Gregg, Buck Daniels, Lee Haines."

They shook hands, and Vic detained Haines a moment.

"Seems to me I've heard of you, Haines."

"Maybe."

Gregg looked at the big man narrowly, and then swung back toward Dan. He knew many things, now. Lee Haines—yes, that was the name. One of the crew who followed Jim Silent; and Dan Barry? What a fool he had been not to remember! It was Dan Barry who had gone on the trail of Silent's gang and hounded it to death; Lee Haines alone had been spared. Yes, half a dozen years before the mountain-folk had heard that story, a wild and improbable one.

It fitted in with what Pete Glass had told him of the shooting of Harry Fisher; it explained a great deal which had mystified him since he first met Barry; it made the thing he had come to do at once easier and harder.

"I s'pose Molly showed a clean pair of heels to the whole lot of 'em?" he said to Dan.

"She's dead."

"Dead?" His astonishment was well enough affected. "God A'mighty, Dan, not Grey Molly—my hoss?"

"Dead. I shot her."

Vic gasped. "You?"

"They'd busted her leg. I put her out of pain."

Gregg dropped into a chair. It was not altogether an affectation, not altogether a piece of skilful acting, now, for though the sheriff had told him all that happened he had not had a chance to feel the truth; but now it swept over him, all her tricks, all that long companionship. He head bowed.

No smile touched the faces of the others in the room, but a reverent silence fell on the room. Then that figure among the shadows moved out, stepped to the side of Vic, and a light hand rested on his shoulder. The other looked up, haggard.

"She's gone, partner," Dan said gently; "but she's paid for."

"Paid for? Dan, they ain't any money could pay me back for Grey Molly."

"I know; I know! Not that way, but there was a life given for a life."

"Eh?"

"One man died for Molly."

As the meaning came home to Gregg, he blinked, and then, looking up, he found a change in the eyes of Barry, for they seemed to be lighted from within, coldly, and his glance went down to the very bottom of Vic's soul, probing. It was only an instant, a thing of which Gregg could not make sure, and then Dan slipped back into his place among the shadows by the wall. But a chill sense of guilt, a premonition of danger, stayed in Gregg. The palms of his hands grew moist.

CHAPTER XV.

SEVEN FOR ONE.

DANGEROUS men were no novelty for Gregg. He had lived with them, worked with them, as hard-fisted himself as any, and as ready for trouble;

but the man of the mountain-desert has a peculiar dread for the practised, known gun-fighter. In the days of the rapier, when the art of fence grew so complicated that half a life was needed for its mastery, men would as soon commit suicide as ruffle it with an assured duelist; and the man of the mountain-desert has a similar respect for those who are born, it might be said, gun in hand.

There was ample reason for the prickling in his scalp, Vic felt, for here he sat on an errand of consummate danger with three of these deadly fighters. Two of them he knew by name and repute, however dimly, and as for Buck Daniels, unless all signs failed the dark, sharp-eyed fellow was hardly less grim than the others.

Vic gaged the three one by one. Daniels might be dreaded for an outburst of wild temper, and in that moment he could be as terrible as any. Lee Haines would fight coolly, his blue eyes never clouded by passion, for that was his repute as the right-hand man of Jim Silent, in the days when Jim had been a terrible, half-legendary figure. One felt that same quiet strength as the tawny-haired man talked to Barry, now; his voice was a smooth, deep current.

But as for Barry himself, Gregg could not compute the factors which entered into the man. By all outward seeming that slender, half-timid figure was not a tithe of the force which either of the others represented; but out of the past Gregg's memory gathered more and more details, clear and clearer, of the wolf-dog, the black stallion, and the whistling man who tracked down Silent—"Whistling Dan" Barry; that was what they called him, sometimes!

Nothing was definite in the mind of Gregg. The stories consisted of patched details, heard here and there at third or fourth hand; but he remembered one epic incident in which Barry had ridden, so rumor told, into the very heart of Elkhead, taken from the jail this very man, this Lee Haines, and carried him through the cordon of every armed man in Elkhead. And there was another picture, dimmer still, which an eye-witness had painted: of how, at an appointed hour, Barry met Jim Silent and killed him.

Out of these thoughts he glanced again at the man in the shadow, half expecting to find his host swollen to giant size. Instead, he found the same meager form, the same old suggestion of youth which would not age, the same pale hands, of almost feminine litheness. Lee Haines talked on—about a porphyry dyke somewhere to the north—a ledge to be found in the space of ten thousand square miles—a list of vague clues—an appeal for Barry to help them find it—and Barry was held listening though ever seeming to drift, or about to drift, toward the door.

Black Bart lay facing his master, and his snaky head followed every movement. Kate sat where the firelight barely touched on her, and in her arms she held Joan, whose white face and great bright eyes were turned toward Daddy Dan. All things in the room centered on the place where the man sat by the wall, and the sense of something impending swept over Gregg; then a wild fear—did they know the danger outside? He must make conversation; he turned to Kate; but at the same moment the voice of Buck Daniels beside him spoke.

"I know how you feel, old man. I remember an old bay hoss of mine, a Morgan hoss, and when he died I grieved for near onto a year, mostly. He wasn't much of a hoss to look at, too long coupled, you'd say, and his legs was short; but he got about like a coyote, and when he sat down on a rope you couldn't budge him with a team of Percherons. That's how good he was! When he was a four-year-old I was cutting out yearlin's with him, and how—"

The loud, cheerful tone fell away to a confidential murmur, Daniels leaned closer, with a smile of prospective humor; but the words which came to Gregg were: "Partner, if I was you I'd get up and git, and I wouldn't stop till I put a hell of a long ways between me and this cabin!"

It spoke well of Vic's nerve that no start betrayed him. He bowed his head a little, as though to catch the trend of the jolly story better, nodding.

"What's wrong?" he muttered back.

"Barry's watchin' you out of the shadow."

Then: "You fool, don't look!"

But there was method in Vic's raising his head. He threw it back and broke into laughter; but while he laughed he searched the shadow by the wall where Dan sat, and he felt glimmering eyes fixed steadily upon him. He dropped his head again, as if to hear more.

"What's it mean, Daniels?"

"You ought to know. I don't. But he don't mean you no good. He's lookin' at you too steady. If I was you—"

Through the whisper of Buck, through the loud, steady talk of Lee Haines, cut the voice of Barry.

"Vic!"

The latter looked up and found that Barry was standing just within the glow of the hearth-light, and something about him made Gregg's heart shrink.

"Vic, how much did they pay you?"

He tried to answer; he would have given ten years of life to have his voice under control for an instant; but his tongue froze. He knew that every one had turned toward him, and he tried to smile, look unconcerned; but in spite of himself his eyes were wide, fixed, and he felt that they could stare into the bottom of his soul and see the guilt.

"How much?"

Then his voice came; but he could have groaned when he heard its crazily shaken, shrill sound.

"What d'you mean, Dan?"

The other smiled, and Gregg added hastily: "If you want me to be movin' along, Dan, of course you're the doctor."

"How much did they pay?" repeated the quiet, inexorable voice.

He could have stood that, even without much fear, for no matter how terrible the man might be in action, his hands were tied in his own house; but now Kate spoke: "Vic, what have you done?"

Then it came, in a flood. Hot shame rolled through him, and the words burst out.

"I'm a yaller houn'-dog, a sneakin' no-good cur! Dan, you're right. I've sold you. They're out there, all of 'em, waitin' in the rocks. For God's sake take my gun and pump me full of lead!"

He threw his arms out, clear of his holster, and turned that Barry might draw his revolver. Vaguely he knew that Haines and Buck had drawn swiftly close to him from either side; vaguely he heard the cry of Kate; but all that he clearly understood was the merciless, unmoved face of Barry. It was pretense; with all his being he wanted to die; but when Barry made no move to strike, he turned desperately to the others.

"Do the job for him. He saved my life, and then I used it to sell him. Daniels, Haines, I got no use for livin'."

Lee Haines met him with a terrible face.

"Vic," he said, "take—this—and march to your friends outside; and when you get through them, plant a forty-five slug in your own dirty heart and then rot." Haines held out his gun with a gesture of contempt.

But Kate slipped in front of him, white and anguished.

"It was the girl you told me about, Vic?" she said. "You did it to get back to her?"

He dropped his head.

"Dan, let him go!"

"I got no thought of usin' him."

"Why not?" cried Vic suddenly. "I'll do the way Haines said. Or else let me stay here and fight 'em off with you. Dan, for God's sake give me one chance to make good."

It was like talking to a face of stone.

"The door's open for you, and waitin'. One thing before you go. That's the same gang you told me about before? Ronicky Joe, Harry Fisher, Gus Reeve, Matt Henshaw, Sliver Waldron, and Pete Glass?"

"Harry Fisher's dead, Dan, if you'll give me one fightin' chance to play square now—"

"Tell 'em that I know 'em. Tell 'em one thing more. I thought Grey Molly was worth only one man. But I was wrong. They've done me dirt and played crooked. They come huntin' me—with a decoy. Now tell 'em from me that Grey Molly is worth seven men, and she's goin' to be paid for in full."

He stepped to the wall and took down the bridle which Vic had hung there.

"I guess you'll be needin' this?"

It ended all talk; it even seemed to Gregg that as soon as he received the bridle from the hand of Barry the truce ended with a sudden period and war began. He turned slowly away.

CHAPTER XVI.

MAN-HUNTING.

As Vic Gregg left the house, the new moon peered at him over a black mountaintop, a sickle of white with a half imaginary line rounding the rest of the circle, and to the shaken mind of Vic it seemed as if a ghostly spectator had come out to watch the tragedy among the peaks. At the line of the rocks the sheriff spoke.

"Gregg, you've busted your contract. You didn't bring him out."

Vic threw his revolver on the ground.

"I bust the rest of it here and now. I'm through. Put on your irons and take me back. Hang me and be damned to you, but I'll do no more to double-cross him."

Sliver Waldron drew from his pocket something which jangled faintly, but the sheriff stopped him with a word. He sat up behind his rock.

"I got an idea, Gregg, that you've finished up your job and double-crossed *us!* Does he know that I'm out here? Sit down there out of sight."

"I'll do that," said Gregg, obeying, "because you got the right to make me; but you ain't got the right to make me talk, and nothin' this side of hell can pry a word out of me!"

The sheriff drew down his brows until his eyes were merely cavities of blackness. Very tenderly he fondled the rifle-butt which lay across his knees, and never in the mountain-desert had there been a more humbly unpretentious figure of a man.

He said: "Vic, I been thinkin' that you had the man-sized makin's of a skunk, but I'm considerable glad to see I've judged you wrong. Sit quiet here. I ain't goin' to put no irons on you if you give me your parole."

"I'll see you in hell before I give you nothin'! I was a man, or a partways man, till I met up with you to-night, and now I'm a houn'-dog that's done my partner dirt! God A'mighty, what made me do it?"

He beat his knuckles against his forehead.

"What you've done you can't undo," answered the sheriff. "Vic, I've seen gents do considerable worse than you've done and come clean afterwards. You're goin' to get off for what you've done to Blondy, and you're goin' to live straight afterwards. You're goin' to get married and you're goin' to play white. Why, man, I had to use you as far as I could. But d'you think I *wanted* you to bring me out Barry? You couldn't look Betty square in the face if you'd done what you set out to do. Now, I ain't pressin' you, but I done some scouting while you was away, and I heard four men's voices in the house. Can you tell me who's there?"

"You've played square, Pete," answered Vic hoarsely, "and I'll do my part. Go down and get on your hosses and ride like hell; because in ten minutes you're goin' to have three bad ones around your necks."

A mutter came from the rest of the posse, for this was rather more than they had planned ahead. The sheriff, however, only sighed, and as the moonlight increased Vic could see that he was deeply, childishly contented, for in the heart of the little dusty man there was that inextinguishable spark, the love of battle.

Chance had thrown him on the side of the law, but sooner or later dull times were sure to come, and then Pete Glass would cut out work of his own making—go bad. The love of the man-trail is a passion that works in two ways, and they who begin by hunting will in the end be the hunted; the mountain-desert is filled with such histories.

"Three to five," said the sheriff, "sounds more interestin', Vic."

A sudden passion to destroy that assured calm rose in Gregg.

"Three common men might make you a game," he said, glowering; "but them ain't common ones. One of 'em I don't know, but he has a damned nervous hand. Another is Lee Haines!"

He had succeeded in part, at least. The sheriff sat bolt erect; he seemed to be hearing distant music.

"Lee Haines!" he murmured. "That was Jim Silent's man. They say he was as fast with a gun as Jim himself." He sighed again. "They's nothing like a big man, Vic, to fill your sights."

"Daniels and Haines — suppose you count them off ag'in' the rest of your gang, Pete. That leaves Barry for you." He grinned maliciously. "D'you know what Barry it is?"

"It's a kind of common name, Vic."

"Pete, have you heard of Whistlin' Dan?"

No doubt about it, he had burst the confidence of the sheriff into fragments. The little man began to pant, and even in the dim light Vic could see that his face was working.

"Him!" he said at length. And then: "I might of knowed! Him!" He leaned closer. "Keep it to yourself, Vic, or you'll have the rest of the boys runnin' for cover before the fun begins."

He snuggled a little closer to his rock and turned his head toward the house.

"Him!" he said again.

Columbus, when he saw the land of his dream wavering blue in the distance, might have hailed it with such a heart-filling whisper, and Vic knew that when these two met, these two slender, small men with the uneasy hands, there would be a battle whose fame would ring from range to range.

"If they was only a bit more light," muttered the sheriff. "My God, Vic, why ain't the moon jest a mite nearer the full?"

After that, not a word for a long time until the lights in the house were suddenly extinguished.

"So they won't show up ag'in' no background when they make their run," murmured the sheriff. He pushed up his hat brim so that it covered his eyes more perfectly. "Boys, get ready. They're comin', now!"

Matt Henshaw took up the word, and repeated it, and the whisper ran down the line of men who lay irregularly among the rocks, until at last Sliver Waldron brought it to a stop with a deep murmur. Not even a whisper could altogether disguise his booming bass. It seemed to Vic Gregg that the air about him grew more tense; his arm muscles commenced to ache from the gripping of his hands. Then a door creaked— they could tell the indubitable sound as if there were a light to see it swing cautiously wide.

"They're goin' out the back way," interpreted the sheriff, "but they'll come around in front. They ain't any other way they can get out of here. Pass that down the line, Matt."

Before the whisper had trailed out half its course, a woman screamed in the house. It sent a jag of lightning through the brain of Vic Gregg; he started up.

"Get down," commanded the sheriff curtly. "Or they'll plant you."

"For God's sake, Pete, he's killin' his wife — Kate — he's gone mad — I seen it comin' in his eyes!"

"Shut up," muttered Glass, "an' listen."

A pulse of sound floated out to them, and stopped the breath of Gregg; it was a deep, stifled sobbing.

"She's begged him to stay with her; he's gone," said the sheriff. "Now it 'll come quick."

But the sheriff was wrong. There was not a sound, not a sign of a rush.

Presently: "What sort of a lass is she, Gregg?"

"All yaller hair, Pete, and the softes' blue eyes you ever see."

The sheriff made no answer, but Vic saw the little bony hand tense about the barrel of the rifle. Still that utter quiet, with the pulse of the sobbing lying like a weight upon the air, and the horror of the waiting mounted and grew, like peak upon peak, before the eyes of the climber.

"Watch for 'em sneakin' up on us through the rocks. Watch for 'em close, lads. It ain't goin' to be a rush."

Once more the sibilant murmur ran down the line, and the voice of Sliver Waldron brought it to a faintly booming period.

"Three of 'em," continued the sheriff, "and most likely they'll come at us three ways."

Through the shadow Vic watched the lips of Glass work, and caught the end of his soft murmur to himself: ". . . . all three!"

He understood; the sheriff had offered up a deep prayer that all three might fall by his gun.

Up from the farther end of the line the whisper ran lightly, swiftly, with a stammer of haste in it:

"To the right!"

Aye, there to the right, gliding from the the corner of the house, went a dark form, and then another, and disappeared among the rocks. They had offered not enough target for even chance shooting.

"Hold for close range," ordered the sheriff, and the order was repeated. However much he might wish to win all the glory of the fray, the sheriff took no chances —threw none of his odds away. He was a methodical man.

A slight patter caught the ear of Vic, like the running of many small children over a heavy carpet, and then two shadows blew around the side of the house, one small and scudding close to the ground, the other vastly larger—a man on horseback. It seemed a naked horse, at first, so close to the back did the rider lean, and before Vic could see clearly the vision burst on them all. Several things kept shots from being fired earlier.

The first alarm had called attention to the opposite side of the house from that on which the rider appeared; then the moon gave only a vague, treacherous light, and the black horse blended into it—the grass lightened the fall of his racing feet.

Like a ship driving through a fog, they rushed into view, the black stallion, and Bart fleeting in front, and the surprise was complete. Vic could see it work even in the sheriff, for the latter, having his rifle trained toward his right, jerked it about with a short curse and blazed at the new target, again, again, and the line of the posse joined the fire. Before the crack of their guns went from the ears of Vic, long before the echoes bellowed back from the hills, Satan leaped high up. Perhaps that change of position saved both it and its rider.

Straight across the pale moon drove the body with head stretched forth, ears back, feet gathered close—a winged horse with a buoyant figure upon it. It cleared a five-foot rock and rushed instantly out of view among the boulders. The fugitive had fired only one shot, and that when the stallion was at the crest of its leap.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SECOND MAN.

THE sheriff was on his feet, whining with eagerness, and with the rest of his men he sent a shower of lead splashing vainly into the deeper night beside the mountain, where the path wound down.

"It's done! Hold up, lads!" called Pete Glass. "He's beat us!"

The firing ceased, and they heard the rush of the hoofs along the graveled slope.

"It's done," repeated the sheriff. "How?"

And he stood staring blankly, with a touch of horror in his face.

"By God, Mat's plugged!"

"Mat Henshaw? Who—"

"Clean through the head."

He lay in an oddly twisted heap, as though every bone in his body were broken, and when they drew him about they found the red mark in his forehead and even made out the dull surprise in his set face. There had been no pain in that death, the second for the sake of Grey Molly.

"The other two!" said the sheriff, more to himself than to Vic, who stood beside him.

"Easy, Pete," he cautioned. "You got nothin' ag'in' Haines and Daniels."

The sheriff flashed at him that hungry, baffled glance.

"Maybe I can find something. You, Gregg, keep your mouth shut and stand back. Halloo!"

He sent a long call quavering between the lonely mountains.

"You yonder—Lee Haines! D'you give up to the law?"

A burst of savage laughter flung back at him, and then:

"Why should I?"

"Haines, I give you fair warnin'! For resistin' the law and interferin', I ask you, do you surrender?"

"Who are you?"

The big voice fairly swallowed the rather shrill tone of the sheriff.

"I'm Sheriff Pete Glass."

"You lie. Whoever heard of a sheriff come sneakin' round like a coyote lookin' for dead meat?"

Pete Glass grinned with rage.

"Haines, you ain't much better 'n spoiled meat if you keep back. I give you till I count ten—"

"Why, you bobtailed skunk," shouted a new voice—"you bone-spavined, pink-eyed rat-catcher—what have you got on us? Come out and dicker, and we'll do the same!"

The sheriff sighed softly, deeply.

"I thought maybe they wouldn't get down to talk," he murmured. But since the last chance for a battle was gone, he stepped fearlessly from behind his rock and advanced into the open. Two tall figures came to meet him.

"Now," said Lee Haines, stalking forward, "one bad move, just the glint of a single gun from the rest of you sheep-thieves, and I'll tame your pet sheriff and send him to hell for a model."

They halted, close to each other, the two big men, Haines in the front, and the sheriff.

"You're Lee Haines?"

"You've named me."

"And you're Buck Daniels?"

"That's me."

"Gents, you've resisted an officer of the law in the act of makin' an arrest. I s'pose you know what that means?"

Big Lee Haines laughed.

"Don't start a bluff, sheriff. I know a bit about the law."

"Maybe by experience?"

It was an odd thing to watch the three, every one of them a practised fighter, every one of them primed for trouble, but each ostentatiously keeping his hands away from the holsters.

"What we might have done if we had come to a pinch," said Haines, "is one thing, and what we did do is another. Barry was started and off before we had a chance to show teeth, my friend, and you never even caught the flash of our guns. If he'd waited—but he didn't. There's nothing left for us to do except say good-by."

The little dusty man stroked his mustache thoughtfully. He had gone out there hoping against hope that his chance might come—to trick the two into violence, even to start an arrest for reasons which he knew his posse would swear to; but it must be borne in mind that Pete Glass was a careful man by instinct.

Taking in probable speed of hand and a thousand other details at a glance, Pete sensed the danger of these two, and felt in his heart of hearts that he was more than master of either of them, considered alone; better than Buck Daniels by an almost safe margin of steadiness—better than Lee Haines by a flickering instant of speed.

Had either of them alone faced him, he would have taken his chance, perhaps, to kill or be killed, for the long trail and the escape had fanned that spark within him to a cold, hungry fire; but to attempt a play with both at the same time was death, and he knew it. Seeing that the game was up, he laid his cards on the table with characteristic frankness.

"Gents," he said, "I reckon you've come clean with me. You ain't my meat, and I ain't goin' to clutter up your way. Besides"—even in the dull moonshine they caught the humorous glint of his eyes—"a friend is a friend, and I'll say I'm glad that you didn't step into the shady side of the law while Barry was gettin' away."

No one could know what it cost Pete Glass to be genial at that instant, for this night he felt that he had just missed the great moment which he had yearned for since the day when he learned to love the kick of a six-shooter against the heel of his hand. It was the desire to meet face to face one whose metal of will and mind was equal to his own, whose nerves were electric energies perfectly under command, whose muscles were fine-spun steel. He had gone half a lifetime on the trail of fighters, and always he had known that when the crisis came his hand would be the swifter, his eye the more steady; the trailing was a delight always, but the actual

kill was a matter of slaughter rather than a game of hazard.

Only the rider of the black stallion had given him the sense of equal power, and his whole soul had risen for the great chance of all. That chance was gone; he pushed the thought of it away—for the time—and turned back to the business at hand.

"They's only one thing," he went on. "Sliver! Ronicky! Step along, gents, and we'll have a look at the insides of that house."

"Steady!" broke in Haines. He barred the path to the front door. "Sheriff, you don't know me, but I'm going to ask you to take my word for what's in that house."

Glass swept him with a look of a new nature.

"I got an idea your word might do. Well, what's in the house?"

"A little five-year-old girl and her mother; nothing else worth seeing."

"Nothing else," considered the sheriff; "but that's quite a lot. Maybe his wife could tell me where he's going—give me an idea where I might call on him?"

"Partner, you can't see her?"

"Can't?"

"No, by God!"

"H-m!" murmured the sheriff. He watched the big man plant himself, swaying a little on his feet as though poising for action, and beside him a slightly smaller figure not less determined.

"That girl in there is old man Cumberland's daughter," said Daniels, "and no matter what her—what Dad Barry may be, Kate Cumberland is white folks."

The sheriff remembered what Vic had said of yellow hair and soft blue eyes.

"Leastways," he said, "she seems to have a sort of way with the men."

"Sheriff, you're on a cold trail," said Haines. "Inside that house is just a heart-broken girl and her baby. If you want to see them—go ahead!"

"She might know something," mused the sheriff, "and I s'pose I'd ought to pry it out of her right now; but I don't care for that sort of pickin's." He repeated softly, "A girl and a baby!" and turned on his heel. "All right, boys—climb your hosses. Two of you take Mat. We will bury him where we put Harry. I guess we can pack him that far."

"How's that?" This from Haines. "One of your gang dropped?"

"He is."

They followed him and stood presently beside the body. Aside from the red mark in the forehead, he seemed asleep and smiling at some pleasant dream; a handsome fellow in the strength of first manhood, this man who was the second to die for Grey Molly.

"It's the end of Dan Barry," said Buck. "Lee, we'll never have Whistlin' Dan for a friend again. He's wild for good."

The sheriff turned and eyed him closely.

"He's got to come back," said Haines. "He's got to come back for the sake of Kate."

"He'd better be dead for the sake of Kate," answered Buck.

"Why, partner, this isn't the first time he's gone wild."

"Don't you see, Lee?"

"Well?"

"He's fighting to kill. He's shooting to kill, and he ain't ever done that before. He crippled his men; he put 'em out of the way with a busted leg or a plugged shoulder; but now he's out to finish 'em. Lee, he'll never come back."

He looked to the white face of Vic Gregg, standing by, and he said without anger: "Maybe it ain't your fault, but you've started a pile of harm. Look at these gents around you, the sheriff and all—they're no better 'n dead, Gregg, and that's all along of you. Barry has started on the trail of all of you. Look at that house back there. It's packed full of hell, and all along of you. Lee, let's get back. I'm feelin' sick inside."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE STRENGTH OF WOMEN.

THERE were three things discussed by Lee Haines and Buck Daniels in the dreary days which followed. The first was to keep on their way across the mountains and cut themselves away from

the sorrow of that cabin. The second was to strike the trail of Barry and hunt until they found his refuge and attempt to lead him back to his family. The third was simply to stay on and, where they found the opportunity, help Kate.

They discarded the first idea without much talk; it would be yellow, they decided, and the debt they owed to the Dan Barry of the old days was too great to be shouldered off so easily; they cast away the second thought still more quickly, for the trail which baffled the shrewd sheriff, as they knew, would be too much for them. It remained to stay with Kate, making excursions through the mountains from day to day to maintain the pretense of carrying on their own business, and always at hand in time of need.

It was no easy part to play, for in the house they found Kate more and more silent, more and more thoughtful, never speaking of her trouble, but behind her eyes a ghost of waiting that haunted them. If the wind shrilled down the pass, if a horse neighed from the corral, there was always the start in her, the thrill of hope, and afterward the pitiful deadening of her smile. She was not less beautiful, they thought, as she grew paler, but the terrible silence of the place drove them away time and again.

Even Joan no longer pattered about the house, and when they came down out of the mountains they never heard her shrill laughter. She sat cross-legged by the hearth in her old place during the evenings, with her chin resting on one hand and her eyes fixed wistfully upon the fire. And sometimes they found her on the little hillock behind the house, from the top of which she could view every approach to the cabin.

Of Dan and even of Black Bart, her playmate, she soon learned not to speak, for the mention of them made her mother shrink and whiten. Indeed, the saddest thing in that house was the quiet in which the child waited, waited, waited and never spoke.

"She ain't more'n a baby," said Buck Daniels, "and you can leave it to time to make her forget."

"But," growled Lee Haines, "Kate isn't a baby. Buck, it drives me damn near crazy to see her fade this way."

"Now, you lay to this," answered Buck. "She'll pull through. She'll never forget, maybe, but she'll go on livin' for the sake of the kid."

"You know a hell of a lot about women, don't you?" said Haines.

"I know enough, son," nodded Buck.

He had, in fact, reduced women to a few distinct categories, and he only waited to place a girl in her particular class before he felt quite intimate acquaintance with her entire mind and soul.

"It'll kill her," pronounced Lee Haines. "Why, she's like a flower, Buck, and sorrow will cut her off at the root. Think of a girl like that thrown away in these damned deserts! It makes me sick—sick! She ought to have nothing but velvet to touch—nothing but a millionaire for a husband, and never a worry in her life." He grew excited. "But here's the flower thrown away and the heel crushing it without mercy."

Buck Daniels regarded him with pity.

"I feel kind of sorry for you, Lee, when I hear you talk about girls. No wonder they make a fool of you. A flower crushed under the foot, eh? You just listen to me, my boy. You and me figure to be pretty hard, don't we? Well, soft pine stacked up ag'in' quartzite is what we are compared to Kate."

Lee Haines gaped at him, too astonished to be angry. He suggested softening of the brain to Buck, but the latter waved aside the implication.

"Now, supposin' Kate was one of these dark girls with eyes like black diamonds and a lot of snap and zip to her? If she was like that I s'pose you'd figure her to forget all about Dan inside of a month—and maybe marry you?"

"You be damned!"

"Maybe I am. Them hard, snappy-lookin' girls are the ones that smash. They're brittle, that's why; but you take a soft-lookin' girl like Kate, maybe she ain't a diamond-point to cut glass, but she's tempered steel that 'll bend and bend and bend, and then when you wait for it

to break it flips up and knocks you down. That's Kate."

Lee Haines rolled a cigarette in silence. He was too disgusted to answer, until his first puff of smoke dissolved Buck in a cloud of thin blue.

"You ought to sing to a congregation instead of to cows, Buck. You have the tune, and you might get by in a church; but cows have sense."

"Kate will buckle and bend and fade for a while," went on Buck, wholly unperturbed, "but just when you go out to pick daisies for her you'll come back and find her singing to the stove. Her strength is down deep, like some of these outlaw hosses that got a filmy, sleepy-lookin' eye. They save their hell till you sink the spurs in 'em. You think she loves Dan, don't you?"

"I have a faint suspicion of it," sneered Haines. "I suppose I'm wrong?"

"You are."

"Buck, I may have slipped a nickel into you, but you're playing the wrong tune. Knock off and talk sense, will you?"

"When you grow up, son, you'll understand some of the things I'm tryin' to explain in words of one syllable. She don't love Dan. She thinks she does, but down deep they ain't a damned thing in the world she gives a rap about exceptin' Joan. Men? What are they to her? Marriage? That's simply an accident that's needed so she can have a baby. Delicate, shrinkin' flower, is she? I tell you, my boy, if it was necessary for Joan she'd tear out your heart and mine and send Dan plumb to hell. You fasten on to them words, because they're gospel."

It was late afternoon while they talked, and they were swinging slowly down a gulch toward the home cabin. At that very time Kate, from the door of the house where she sat, saw a dark form slink from rock to rock at the rim of the little plateau, a motion so swift that it flicked through the corner of her eye, a thing to be sensed rather than seen. She sat up very stiff, her lips white as chalk, but nothing more stirred.

A few minutes later, when her heart was beating almost at normal, she heard Joan scream from behind the house, not in terror or pain, as her keen mother-ear knew perfectly well, but with a wild delight. She whipped about the corner of the house and there she saw Joan with her pudgy arms around the neck of Black Bart.

"Bart! Dear old Bart! Has he come? Has he come?"

And she strained her eyes against the familiar mountains around her as if she would force her vision through rock. There was no trace of Dan, no sign or sound when she would even have welcomed the eery whistle. The wolf-dog was already at play with Joan. She was on his back, and he darted off in an effortless gallop, winding to and fro among the rocks.

Most children would have toppled among the stones at the first of his swerves, but Joan clung like a burr, both hands dug into his hair, shrieking with excitement. Sometimes she reeled and almost slid at one of those lightning turns, for the game was to almost unseat her, but just as she was sliding off Bart would slacken her pace and let her find a firm seat once more. They wound farther and farther away, and suddenly Kate cried, terror-stricken: "Joan! Come back!"

A tug at the ear of the wolf-dog swung them around; then as they approached the fear left the mind of the mother and a new thought came in its place. She coaxed Joan from Bart—they could play later on, she promised, to their heart's desire—and led her into the house.

Black Bart followed to the door, but not all their entreaty or scolding could make him cross the threshold. He merely snarled at Kate, and even Joan's tugging at his ears could not budge him. He stood canting his head and watching them wistfully while Kate changed Joan's clothes.

She dressed her as if for a festival, with a blue bonnet that let the yellow hair curl out from the edges, and a little blue cloak, and shiny boots incredibly small, and around the bonnet she laid a wreath of yellow wild flowers. Then she wrote her letter, closed it in an envelope, and fastened it securely in the pocket of the cloak.

She drew Joan in front of her and held her by both hands.

"Joan, darling," she said, "Munner wants you to go with Bart up through the mountains. Will you be afraid?"

A very decided shake of the head answered her, for Joan's eyes were already over her shoulder looking toward the big dog. And she was a little sullen at these unnecessary words.

"It might grow dark," she said. "You wouldn't care."

Here Joan became a little dubious, but a whine from Bart seemed to reassure her.

"Bart will keep Joan," she said.

"He will. And he'll take you up through the rocks to Daddy Dan."

The face of the child grew brilliant.

"Daddy Dan?" she whispered.

"And when you get to him take this little paper out of your pocket and give it to him. You won't forget?"

"Give the paper to Daddy Dan," repeated Joan solemnly.

Kate dropped to her knees and gathered the little body close, close, until Joan cried out, but when she was released the child reached up an astonished hand, touched the face of Kate with awe, and then stared at her finger-tips.

A moment later Joan stood in front of Black Bart, with the head of the wolf-dog seized firmly between her hands while she frowned intently into his face.

"Take Joan to Daddy Dan," she ordered.

At the name the sharp ears pricked; a speaking intelligence grew up in his eyes.

"Giddap," commanded Joan, when she was in position on the back of Bart. And she thumped her heels against the furry ribs.

Toward Kate, who stood trembling in the door, Bart cast the departing favor of a throat-tearing growl, and then shambled across the meadow with that smooth trot which wears down all other four-footed creatures. He was already on the far side of the meadow and beginning the ascent of the first slope when the glint of the sun on the yellow wild flowers flashed on the eye of Kate.

It had all seemed natural until that moment, the only possible thing to do, but now she felt suddenly that Joan was thrown away—thought of the darkness which would soon come—remembered the yellow terror which sometimes gleamed in the eyes of Black Bart after nightfall.

She cried out, but the wolf-dog kept swiftly on his way. She began to run, still calling, but, rapidly as she went, Black Bart slipped steadily away from her, and when she reached the shoulder of the mountain she saw the dark form of Bart with the blue patch above it drifting up the wall of the opposite ravine. She knew where they were going now; it was the old cave upon which she and Dan had come one day in their rides, and Dan had prowled for a long time through the shadowy recesses.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE VENTURE.

FROM the moment Joan gave the name of Daddy Dan the wolf-dog kept to the trail with arrowy straightness. Whatever the limitations of Bart's rather uncanny intelligence, upon one point he was usually letter-perfect, and even when a stranger mentioned Dan in the hearing of the dog it usually brought a whine or at least an anxious look. He hewed to his line now with that animal sense of direction which men never wholly understand.

Boulders and trees slipped away on either side of Joan; now on a descent of the mountainside he broke into a lope that set the flowers fluttering on her bonnet; now he prowled up the ravine beyond, utterly tireless.

He was strictly business. When she slipped a little from her place as he veered around a rock he did not slow up, as usual, that she might regain her seat, but switched his head back with a growl that warned her into position. That surprise was hardly out of her mind when she saw a gay patch of wild flowers a little from the line of his direction, and she tugged at his ear to swing him toward it. A sharp jerk of his head tossed her hand aside, and again she caught the glint of wild eyes as he looked back at her. Then she grew grave, puzzled.

She trusted Black Bart with all her heart, as only a child can trust dumb animals, but now she sensed a change in him. She had guessed at a difference on that night when Dan came home for the last time; and the same thing seemed to be in the dog to-day. Before she could make up her mind as to what it might be, Black Bart swung aside up a steep slope and whisked her into the gloom of a cave. Into the very heart of the darkness he glided and stopped.

"Daddy Dan!" she called.

A faint echo, after a moment, came back to her from the depths of the cave, making her voice strangely deep. Otherwise, there was no answer.

"Bart!" she whispered, suddenly frightened by the last murmur of that echo. "Daddy Dan's not here. Go back!"

She tugged at his ear to turn him, but again that jerk of the head freed his ear. He caught her by the cloak, crouched close to the floor, and she found herself all at once sitting on the gravelly floor of the cave with Bart facing her.

"Bad Bart!" she said, scrambling to her feet. "Naughty dog!"

She was still afraid to raise her voice in that awful silence and in the dark. When she glanced around her she made out vague forms through the dimness that might be the uneven walls of the cave or might be strange and awful forms of night.

"Take me home!"

A growl that went shuddering down the cave stopped her, and now she saw that the eyes of Bart glowed green and yellow. Even then she could not believe that he would harm her and stretched out a tentative hand. This time she made out the flash of his teeth as he snarled. He was no longer the Bart she had played with around the cabin, but a strange wild thing, and with a scream she darted past him toward the door.

Never had those chubby legs flown so fast, but even as the light from the mouth of the cave glimmered around her she heard a crunching on the gravel from behind, and then a hand, it seemed, caught her cloak and jerked her to a stop.

She fell sprawling, head over heels, and when she looked up there sat Bart upon his haunches above her, growling terribly and gripping the end of the cloak. No doubt about it now. Black Bart would have his teeth in her throat if she made another movement toward the entrance.

A city child would have either gone mad with terror or else made that fatal struggle to reach the forbidden place, but Joan had learned many things among the mountains, and, among others, she knew the difference between the tame and the free. The old dappled cow was tame, for instance; and the Maltese cat, which came too close to Bart the year before and received a broken back for its carelessness, had been tame; and the brown horse with the white face and the dreary eyes was tame. They could be handled and teased and petted and bossed about at will.

Other creatures were different. For instance, the scream of the hawk always made her shrink a little closer to the ground, or else run helter-skelter for the house; and sometimes, up the gulches, she had heard the wailing of a mountain lion on the trail, hunting swiftly, and very hungry. There was even something about the dead eyes of certain lynxes and coyotes and bobcats which Daddy Dan trapped that made Joan feel these animals belonged to a world where the authority of man was only the strength of his hand or his cunning. Not that she phrased these thoughts in definite words, but Joan was very close to nature, and therefore her instincts gave her a weird little touch of wisdom in such matters.

And when she lay there tangled in her cloak and looked up into the glowing eyes of Bart and heard his snarling roll around her, and pass in creepy chills up her back, she nearly died of fear, to be sure, but she lay as still as still, frozen into a part of the rock. Black Bart was gone, and in his place was a terrible creature which belonged there among the shadows, for it could see in the night.

Presently the bright eyes disappeared, and now she saw that Bart lay stretched across the entrance to the cave, where the long shadow was now creeping down the slope. Inches by inches she ventured to sit up, and all it brought from Bart was a quick turn of the head and a warning

growl. It meant as plainly as though he had spoken in so many words: "Stay where you are, and I don't care in the least what you do, but don't try to cross this entrance if you fear the length of my teeth and the keenness thereof."

And she did fear them, very much, for she remembered the gashes across the back and the terrible rips up the side of the dead Maltese cat.

She even took a little heart, after a time. A grown-up cannot feel terror or grief as keenly as a child, but neither does terror or grief pass away a tithe as fast. She seemed at liberty to roam about in the cave as long as she did not go near the entrance, and now the shadows and the dimness no longer frightened her. Nothing was terrible except that long, dark body which lay across the entrance to the cave, and she finally got to her feet and began to explore. She came first on a quantity of dead grass heaped in a corner—that was where Satan was stalled, no doubt, and it made all the cave seem almost homelike.

She found, too, a number of stones grouped together with ashes in the hollow circle—that was where the fires were built, and there to the side lay the pile of dead wood. A little down the cave and directly in the center of the top she next saw the natural aperture where the smoke must escape, and last of all she came on the bed. Boughs heaped a foot thick with the blankets on top, neatly stretched out, and the tarpaulin over all, made a couch as soft as down and fragrant with the pure scent of evergreens.

Joan tried the surface with a foot that sank to her ankle, then with her hands, and finally sat down to think. The first fear was almost gone; she understood that Bart was keeping her here until Dan came home, and fear does not go hand in hand with understanding. She only wondered, now, at the reason that kept Daddy Dan living in this cave so far from the warm comfort of the cabin, and so far away from her mother; but thinking makes small heads drowsy, and in five minutes Joan lay with her head pillowed on her arm, sound asleep.

When she awoke the evening gray of the cave had given place to blackness. Joan sat up with a start; she would have cried out, bewildered, but now she heard a noise on the gravel, and turned to see Daddy Dan entering the cave, with Satan behind him, quite distinctly outlined by the sunset outside. Black Bart walked first, looking back over his shoulder as though he led the way.

It was partly because the black, silhouetted figures awed her somewhat, and partly because she wished to give Daddy Dan a gay surprise, that Joan did not run to him. And then, in the darkness, she heard Satan munching the dried grass, and the squeak and rattle as the saddle was drawn off and hung up, scraping against the rock.

"What you been doin', Bart?" queried the voice of Daddy Dan; and the last of Joan's fears fell from her as she listened. "You act kind of worried. If you been runnin' rabbits all day and got your pads full of thorns, I'll everlastingly treat you rough."

The wolf-dog whined.

"Well, speak up. What do you want? Want me over there?"

It would have been a trifle unearthly to most people, but Joan knew the ways of Daddy Dan with Satan and Black Bart. She lay quite still, shivering with pleasure as the footsteps approached her. Then a match scratched—she saw by the blue spurt of flame that he was lighting a pine torch, then whirling it until the flame ate down to the pitchy knot. He held it above his head, and now she saw him plainly; the light cascaded over his shoulders, glowed on his eyes, and then puffed out sidewise in a draft.

Joan was up on her feet, and running toward him with a cry of joy, until she remembered that he was not to be approached like her mother. There were never any bear-hugs from him, no caresses, not much laughter. She stopped barely in time, and stood with her fingers interlaced, staring up at him, half delighted, half afraid. She read his mind by microscopic changes in his eyes and lips.

"Munner sent me."

That was wrong, she saw at once.

"And Bart brought me." Much better

now. "And, oh, Daddy Dan, I've been *lonesome* for you!"

He continued to stare at her for another moment, and Joan could not tell whether he were angry or indifferent or pleased.

"Well," he murmured at length, "I guess you're hungry, Joan?"

She knew it was complete acceptance, and she could hardly keep from a shout of happiness. Daddy Dan had a great aversion to sudden outcries.

"I guess I am," said Joan.

CHAPTER XX.

THE HOUSE OF DADDY DAN.

HE made the preparation for supper with such easy speed that everything seemed to be done by magic hands. When Joan's mother cooked supper there was always much rattling of the stove, then the building of the fire, a long preparation of food, and another interval when things steamed and sizzled on the fire. There followed the setting of the table, and then a long, aching time of hunger when the food was in sight, but one could not eat until Daddy Dan had done this, and Munner had done that.

Also, when one did eat, half the taste was taken from things by the necessity of various complicated evolutions of knife and fork. Instance the absurdity of taking the fork under the thumb with the forefinger pressing along the back of the wabbly instrument, when any one could see that the proper, natural way of using a fork was to grasp it daggerwise and drive it firmly through that skidding piece of meat. Not only this, but a cup must be held in one hand, and bread must be broken into little pieces before putting butter on it.

Above all, no matter how terribly hard one tried, there was sure to be a mistake, and then: "Now, Joan, don't do that. This is the way—"

But how different everything was in this delightful house of Daddy Dan! In an incredibly short time three torches flared about them and filled the air with scents of freshness and the outdoors—scents that went tingling up the nose and filled one with immense possibilities of eating. At the very same time, a few motions caused a heap of wood to catch fire and blaze among the stones, while a steady stream of blue-white smoke wavered up toward the top of the cave, to disappear in the shadows.

After this her father showed her a little stream of water which must come from a spring far back in the cave, and the current slipped noiselessly along one wall, and dipped out of sight again before it reached the entrance to the place. Here she discovered a little bowl, made out of small stones nicely fitted together, and allowing the water to pour over one edge and out at another with a delicious purling—such crystal clear water that one actually wanted to wash in it even if it was cold, and even if one had the many sore places on fingers and nose and behind the ears.

Behold! no sooner did one turn from the washing of hands and face than the table was miraculously spread upon the surface of a flat rock, with other stones near by to serve as chairs; and on the table steamed "pone," warmed over; coffee with milk in it—coffee, which was so strictly banned at home!—potatoes sliced to transparent thinness and fried to crisp brown at the edges, and a great slab of meat that fairly shouted to the appetite.

So far, so good, but the realization was a thousandfold better than anticipation. No cutting of one's own meat at this enchanted board! The shining knife of Daddy Dan divided it into delectable bits with the speed of light, and it needed only the slightest amount of experimenting and cautious glances to discover that one could use a fork daggerwise, and when in doubt even seize upon a morsel with one's fingers and wipe the fingers afterward on a bit of the dry grass. One could grasp the cup by both sides, scorning the silly handle, and if occasionally one sipped the coffee with a little noise—which added astonishingly to the taste—there was no sharp warning, no frowning eye to overlook.

Besides, at Munner's table, there was never time to pay attention to Joan, for there was talk about vague, abstract things—the price of skins, the melting of the snows, the condition of the passes, the long

and troubling argument about the wicker chairs, with some remarkably foolish asides, now and then, concerning happiness and love—when all the time any one with half an eye could see that the thing to do was to eat and eat and eat until that hollow place ceased to be. Talking came afterward.

In the house of Daddy Dan all these things were ordered as they should be. Not a word was said; not a glance of criticism rested upon her; when her tin plate was cleared she heard no reproofs for eating too greedily, but she was furnished anew from the store of good things on the rock.

In the place of conversation, there were other matters to occupy the mind during the meal. For presently she observed the beautiful head of Satan just behind his master—Satan, who could pass over noisy gravel with the softness of a cat, and now loomed out of the deeper night down the cavern. With infinite caution, the head lowered beside Dan, and the quivering muzzle stole toward a fragment of the pone.

Joan watched breathlessly, and then she saw that in spite of the caution of that movement her father knew all about it—just a glint of amusement in the corner of his eyes, just a slight twitch at the corners of his mouth to tell Joan that he was as delighted as a boy playing a trick. Barely in time to save the morsel of pone, he spoke, and the head was dashed up. Yet Satan was not entirely discouraged. If he could not steal the bread he would beg for it.

It made Joan pause in her destruction of the edibles, not to watch openly, for an instinct told her that the thing to do was to note these byplays from the corner of one's eye, as Daddy Dan did, and swallow the ripples of mirth that came tickling in the throat. She knew perfectly well that Satan would have it in the end, for of all living things not even Munner had such power over Dan as the black stallion. He maneuvered adroitly. First he circled the table and stood opposite the master, begging with his eyes, but Dan looked fixedly down at the rock until an impatient whinny called up his eyes. Then he pretended the most absolute surprise.

"Why, Satan, you old scoundrel, what are you doin' over there? Get back where you belong!"

He gestured with a thumb over his shoulder, and Satan glided around the rock and stood once more behind Dan.

"Manners?" continued Dan. "You ain't got 'em. You'll be tryin' to sit down at the table with me pretty soon." He concluded: "But I'll teach you one of these days, and you'll smart for a week."

Even at the mock menace Joan trembled a little, but to her astonishment Satan paid not the slightest heed. Dan sat with his hat on his head—which was a new and delightful event at the table—and now the stallion took the hat by the crown, dexterously, and raised it just an inch and put it back in place. Black Bart, having crept out of the shadows, sat down near Joan with his long red tongue lolling out. This procedure called a growl from him, but the master continued eating without noticing, apparently, Satan't insolence.

A velvety muzzle appeared, with the chin resting on the shoulder of Dan and the luminous eyes above. He whinnied so softly that it was not more than a human whisper, and meant almost as much.

"Oh," said Dan, in all seeming just roused to attention; "hungry, old boy?"

He raised the morsel of pone between thumb and forefinger, holding it tightly. Then it was a joy to watch Satan. He tried to tug it all away at once, but only a fragment broke off. He stamped in impatience, and then went to work to nibble the bread away on all sides of Dan's fingers, very fine work for such broad, keen chisels as Satan's teeth; but he went about it with the skill of long practise, turning his head this way and that and always watching the face of the master with sidewise eyes, one ear forward and one ear back.

Finally the tight fingers opened out, and Satan gathered the last crumbs from the smooth palm.

Two or three times during this performance Black Bart had half risen from his haunches and a growl swelled almost inaudibly in his throat, but now he stalked around the table and pushed his narrow head between Dan's shoulder and the stallion. A snarl of incredible ferocity made

Satan turn, but without the slightest dread apparently. For an instant the two stood nose to nose, Black Bart a picture of snarling danger and Satan with curiously pricking ears and bright eyes.

The growling rose toward a crescendo, a terrible sound; then a lean hand shot out with that speed which Joan could never comprehend—and which always made her think, rather breathlessly, of the strike of a snake. The fingers settled around the muzzle of Bart.

"Of all the no-good houn' dogs," declared Dan, "you're the worst and the most jealousest. Lie down!"

Bart obeyed slowly, but his evil eyes were fixed upward upon the head of Satan.

"If you got any manners," remarked Dan, "you'll be sayin' that you're sorry."

The ears flattened along the snaky head; otherwise no answer.

"Sorry!" repeated the master.

Out of the deep throat of Black Bart, infinitely, ludicrously small, came a whine which was more doglike than anything Joan had ever heard before from the wolf.

"Now," continued the implacable master, "you go over in that corner and lie down."

Black Bart arose with a final ugly look for Satan and sneaked with hanging head and tail to the outer edge of the circle of light.

"Farther! Clear over there in the dark," came the order, and Bart had to uncoil himself again in the very act of lying down and retreat with another ominous growl clear into the darkness. Satan held his head high and watched triumphantly.

But Joan felt that this was a little hard on Bart; she wanted to run over and comfort him, but she knew from of old that it was dangerous to interfere where Daddy Dan was disciplining either horse or wolf; besides, she was not quite recovered from her new awe for Bart.

"All right," said the master presently, and without raising his voice.

It brought a dark thunderbolt rushing into the circle of the light and stopping at Dan's side with such suddenness that his paws slid in the gravel. There he stood, actually wagging his bushy tail—an unprecedented outburst of joy for Bart!—and staring hungrily into the face of Dan. She saw a wonderful softening in the eyes of her father as he looked at the great, dangerous beast.

"You ain't a bad sort," he said, "but you need puttin' in place continual."

Black Bart whined agreement.

After that, when the dishes were being cleared away and cleaned with a speed fully as marvelous as the preparation of the supper, Joan remembered with a guilty start the message which she should have given to Daddy Dan, and she brought out the paper, much rumpled.

He stood by the fire to read the letter.

> Dan, come back to us. The house is empty and there's no sign of you except your clothes and the skins you left drying in the vacant room. Joan sits all day, mourning for you, and my heart is breaking. Oh, Dan, I don't grieve so much for what has been done, but I tremble for what you may do in the future.

With the letter still in his hand, Dan walked thoughtfully to Satan and took the fine head between his fingers.

"S'pose some gent was to drop you, Satan," he murmured. "S'pose he was to plug you while you was doin' your best to take me where I want to go. S'pose he shot you not for anything you'd done, but because of something ag'in' me. And s'pose after killin' you he was to sneak up on me with a lot of other gents and try to murder me before I had a chance to fight back. Satan, wouldn't I be right to trail 'em all—and kill 'em one by one? Would I?"

Joan heard very little of the words—only a soft murmur of anxiety—and she saw that Daddy Dan was very thoughtful indeed. The stallion reached for the brim of Dan's hat—it was withdrawn from his reach—his head bowed, like a nod of assent.

"Why, even Satan can see I'm right," murmured Dan, and, moving back to the fire, he tore the letter into many pieces which fluttered down in a white stream and made the blaze leap up.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

The Seventh Man

Part IV

by Max Brand

Author of "Trailin'," "The Guide to Happiness," "Tiger," etc.

A Sequel to "The Untamed" and "The Night Horseman."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ACID TEST.

MRS. JOHNNY SOMMERS managed to preserve her dignity while she escorted the visitor into the front room, and even while she asked him to sit down and wait, but once she had closed the door behind her she cast dignity far away and did two steps at a time going up-stairs.

The result was that she reached the room of Betty Neal entirely out of breath; two hundred pounds of fat, good-natured widowhood do not go with speed. She tossed open the door without any preliminary knock and stood there very red with a clearly defined circle of white in the center of each cheek. For a moment there was no sound except her panting and Betty Neal stared wildly at her from above her book.

"He's come!" gasped Mrs. Somers.

"Who?"

"Him!"

As if this odd explanation made everything clear, Betty Neal sprang from her chair and she grew so pale that every freckle stood out.

"Him!" she echoed ungrammatically.

Then: "Where is he? Let me downstairs!

But the widow closed the door swiftly behind her and leaned her comfortable bulk against it.

"You ain't goin'," she asserted. "You ain't goin', leastways not till you got time to think it over."

"I haven't time to think. I—he—"

"That was the way with me," nodded Mrs. Sommers, and her eyes were tragic. "I went ahead and married Johnny in spite of everything, and look at me now—a widder! No, I aint sorry for myself because I was a fool."

"Mrs. Sommers," said Betty, "will you please step out of my way?"

"Honey, for heaven's sake think a minute before you go down and face that man. He's dangerous. When I opened the door and seen him, I tell you the shivers went up my back."

"Is he thin? Is he pale?" cried Betty Neal. "How did he get away? Did he

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escape? Did they parole him? Did they pardon him? Did he— Let me get down!"

Mrs. Sommers flung away from the door.

"Then go and marry your—man-killer!"

But Betty Neal was already clattering down the stairs. Half way to the bottom her strength and courage ebbed suddenly from her; she went on with short steps, and when at least she closed the parlor door behind her, she was staring as if she looked at a ghost.

Yet Vic Gregg was not greatly changed—a little thinner perhaps, and just now he certainly did not have his usual color. The moment she appeared he jumped to his feet as if he had heard a shot, and now he stood with his feet braced a little to meet a shock, one hand twitching and playing nervously with the embroidered cloth on the table. She did not speak; merely stood with her fingers still gripping the handle of the door as if she were ready to dart away at the first alarm.

A wave of pain went over the face of Vic Gregg and remained looking at her out of his eyes, for all that his single-track, concentrated mind could perceive in her was the thing he took for fear.

"Miss Neal," he said. His voice shook, straightened out again. He made her think of one of her big schoolboys who had forgotten his lesson and now stood cudgeling his memory and dreading that terrible nightmare of "staying after school." She had a wild desire to laugh.

"Miss Neal, I ain't here to try to take up things that can't be took up agin." Apparently he had prepared the speech carefully, and now he went on with more ease: "I'm leavin' these here parts for some place unknown. Before I go I jest want to say I know I was wrong from the beginnin'. All I want to say is that I was jest all sort of tied up in a knot inside and when I seen you with—him—" He stopped. "I hope you marry some gent that's worth you, only they ain't any such. An'—I want to wish you good luck, an' say good-by."

He swept the perspiration from his forehead, and caught up his hat; he had been through the seventh circle of torture.

"Oh, Vic, dear!" cried a voice he had never heard before. Then a flurry of skirts, then arms about him, then tears and laughter, and eyes which went hungrily over his face.

"I been a houn'-dog. My God, Betty, you don't mean—"

"That I love you, Vic. I never knew what it was to love you before."

"After I been a man-killin', lyin', sneakin'—"

"Don't you say another word. Vic, it was all my fault."

"It wasn't It was mine. But if you'd only kind of held off a little and gone easy with me—"

"You didn't give me a chance."

"When I looked back from the road you wasn't standin' in the door."

"I was. And you didn't look back."

"I did."

"Vic Gregg, are you trying to—"

But the anger fled from her as suddenly as it had come.

"I don't care. I'll take all the blame."

"I don't want you to. I won't let you."

She laughed hysterically.

"Vic, tell me that you're free?"

"I'm paroled."

"Thank God! Oh, I've prayed and prayed—Vic, don't talk. Sit down there—so! I just want to look and look at you. There's a hollow, hungry place in me that's filling up again."

"It was Pete Glass," said Gregg brokenly. "He—he trusted me clean through when the rest was lookin' at me like I was a snake. Pete got word to the governor, and so—"

There followed a long interval of talk that meant nothing, and then, as the afternoon waned towards evening, and the evening towards dark, he told her the whole story of the long adventure. He left out nothing, not a detail that might tell against him. When he came to the moment when Glass persuaded him to go back and betray Barry he winced, but set his jaw and plunged ahead.

She, too, paled when she heard that, and for a moment she had to cover her eyes, but she was older by half a life-time than she had been when he was last with her, and now she read below the surface. Be-

sides, Vic had offered to undo what he had done, had offered to stay and fight for Barry, and surely that evened the score!

There was a light rap on the door, and then Mrs. Sommers came in with a tray.

"Maybe you young folks forgot about supper," she said. "I just thought I'd bring in a bite for you."

She placed it on the table, and then lingered, delighted, while her eyes went over them together and one by one. Perhaps Betty Neal was a fool for throwing herself away on a gun-fighter, but at least Mrs. Sommers was furnished with a story which half Alder would know by to-morrow. The walls of her house were not sound proof. Besides, Mrs. Sommers had remarkably keen ears.

"They's been a gentleman here askin' for you, Vic," she said, "but I thought maybe you wouldn't like it much to be disturbed. So I told him you wasn't here."

Her smile fairly glowed with triumph.

"Thanks," said Gregg, "but who was he?"

"I never seen him before. Anyway, it didn't much matter. He wanted to see some of the rest of the boys quite bad: Pete Glass and Ronicky Joe, and Sliver Waldron, and Gus Reeve. He seemed to want to see 'em all particular bad."

"Pete Glass and Ronicky and—the posse!" murmured Vic. He grew thoughtful. "He wanted to see me, too?"

"Very particular, and he seemed kind of down-hearted when he found that Pete was out of town. Wanted to know when he might be back."

"What sort of a lookin' gent was he?" asked Vic, and his voice was sharp.

"Him? Oh, he looked like a tenderfoot to me. Terrible polite, though, and he had a voice that wasn't hardly rougher'n a girl's. Seemed like he was sort of embarrassed jest talkin' to me." She smiled at the thought, but Gregg was on his feet now, his hands on the shoulders of Mrs. Sommers as though he would try to shake information from her loose bulk.

"Look quick, now," he said. "Where did you send him?"

"How you talk! Why, where should I send him? I told him like as not Ronicky and Sliver and Gus would be down to Lorrimer's—"

The groan of Vic made her stop with a gasp.

"What did he look like?"

Mrs. Sommers was very sober. Her smile congealed.

"Black hair, and young, and good-lookin', and b-b-brown eyes, and—"

"God!"

"Vic," cried Betty Neal, "what is it!" She looked around her in terror.

"It's Barry."

He turned towards the door, and then stopped, in an agony of indecision. Betty Neal was before him, blocking the way with her arms outstretched.

"Vic, you sha'n't go. You sha'n't go. You've told me yourself that he's sure death."

"God knows he is."

"You won't go, Vic?"

"But the others! Ronicky—Gus—"

She stammered in her fear.

"That's their look-out! They're three to one. Let them kill—"

"But they don't know him. They've never been close enough to see his face. Besides, no three men—I—he—for God's sake tell me what to do!"

"Stay here—if you love me. I won't let you go. I won't."

"I got to warn them."

"You'll be killed!"

He tore away her hands.

"I got to warn them—but who'll I help? Them three against Dan? He saved me—twice! But—I got to go!"

"If you fight for him first he'll only turn on you afterwards. Vic, stay here."

"What good's my life? What good's it if I'm a yaller dog agin? I'm goin' out—and be a man!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FIFTH MAN.

THE moment Vic Gregg stood in the open air, with the last appeal of Betty ringing still at his ear, he felt a profound conviction that he was about to die and he stood a moment breathing

deeply, taking the faint alkali scent of the dust and looking up to the stars.

It was that moment when night blends with day and there is no sign of light in the sky except that the stars burn more and more bright as the darkness thickens, and Vic Gregg watched the stars draw down more closely and believed that he was seeing this for the last time. Alder seemed inexpressibly dear to him as he stood there through a little space, and the vaguely discernible outlines of the shacks along the street were like the faces of friends. In that house behind him was Betty Neal, waiting, praying for him, and indeed, had it not been for shame, he would have weakened now and turned back. For he hardly knew which way to turn.

He wanted to save Ronicky and the other two from the attack of Barry, yet he would not lay a trap for Dan. To Barry he owed a vast debt; his debt to the three was that which any human being owes to another.

He had to save them from the wolf which ran through the night in the body of a man.

That thought sent him at a run for Captain Lorrimer's saloon. It was lighted brilliantly by the gasoline lamp within, but a short distance away from it he heard no sound and his imagination drew a terrible picture of the big, empty room, with three dead men lying in the center of it where the destroyer had reached them one by one. That was what took the blood from his face and made him a white mask of tragedy when he stepped into the door of the saloon. It was quiet, but half a dozen men sat at the tables in the corner, and among them were Ronicky and the other two. Sliver Waldron was in the very act of pulling back his chair, and perhaps all three had just come in.

Perhaps Barry had come here to look for his quarry and found them not yet arrived; perhaps he was now hunting in other places through the town; perhaps he was even now crouched in the shadow near at hand and ready to attack.

It made the hand of Vic Gregg contract with a cruel pressure when it fell on the shoulder of Sliver Waldron.

"Now, what in hell!" grunted that hardened warrior.

He had no love for Vic Gregg since that day when the posse rode through the hills after him; neither had Ronicky or Gus Reeve, who rose from their chairs as if at a signal.

"Come with me, gents," said Vic. "An' come quick!"

They asked no questions and did not stay to argue the point, for he had that in his face which meant action. He led them outside, and behind the horse shed of the saloon.

"We're alone?" he asked.

"Nothin' in sight."

"Look sharp."

They peered about them through the night, and a wan moon only helped to make the darkness visible.

"Gents, we may be alone now, but we ain't goin' to be alone long. Get your hosses and ride like hell. Barry is in town."

"Vic, you're drunk."

"I tell you, he's been seen!"

"Then by God," growled Sliver Waldron, "lead me to him. I need to have a little talk with that gent."

"Lead you *to* him?" echoed Vic Gregg. "Sliver, are you hungerin' to push daisies?"

"Look here, Bud," answered the older man, and he laid a hand on the shoulder of Vic. "You been with this Barry gent, and you've lived in his house. D'you mean to say you're one of the lot that talk about him like he was a ghost bullets couldn't harm? I tell you, son, they's been so much chatter about him that folks forget he's human. I'm goin' to remind 'em of that little fact."

Vic Gregg groaned. Even while he talked he was glancing over his shoulder as if he feared the shadows under the moon. His voice was half gasp, half whisper.

"Sliver—Ronicky—don't ask me how I know—jest believe me when I say Dan Barry 'll never die by the hand of any man. I tell you—he can see in the dark!"

A soft oath from Gus Reeve; a twitching of Ronicky's head told that this last had taken effect. Sliver Waldron suddenly altered his manner.

"All right, Vic. Trot back into town,

or come with us. We're going to move out."

"The wisest thing you ever done, Sliver."

"I'm feelin' the same way," breathed Gus Reeve.

"S'long," whispered Vic Gregg, and faded into the night, running.

The others, without a word among themselves, gathered their horses and struck down the valley out of Alder. The padding and swish of the sand about the feet of their mounts, the very creaking of the saddle leather, seemed to alarm them, and they were continually turning and looking back. That is, Gus Reeve and Ronicky Joe manifested these signs of trouble, but Sliver Waldron, riding in the center of the trio, never moved his head.

They were hardly well out of the town when a swift rush of hoof beats swept up from behind, and a horseman darted into the pale mist of the valley bending low over his pommel to cut the wind of his riding.

"Who is it?"

"Vic Gregg!" muttered Gus Reeve. "Stir along, Sliver. Vic air't lingerin' any!"

But Sliver Waldron drew rein, and let his horse go on at a walk.

"Hearin' you talk, Ronicky," he said, "you'd think you was really scared of Dan Barry."

Ronicky Joe stiffened in his saddle and peered through the uncertain light to make out if Sliver were jesting. But the latter seemed perfectly grave.

"A gent would almost think," went on Sliver, "that we three was runnin' away from Barry, instead of goin' out to set a trap for him."

There was something nearly akin to a grunt from Gus Reeve, but Ronicky merely continued to stare at the leader.

"'S a matter of fact," said Sliver, "when Vic was talkin' I sort of felt the chills go up my back. How about you, Ronicky?"

"I'll tell a man," sighed Ronicky. "While Vic was talkin' I seen that devil comin' on his hoss like he done when he broke out of the cabin that might. I'll tell you straight, Sliver. I had my gun drilled on him. I couldn't of missed; but after I fired he kept straight on. It was like puncturin' a shadow!"

"Sure," nodded Sliver. "Shootin' by night ain't ever a sure thing."

Ronicky wiped his heated brow.

"So I sent Vic away before he had a chance to get me real nervous. But when he comes back—well, boys, it 'll be kind of amusin' to watch Vic's face when he saunters into town to-morrow and sees Dan Barry—maybe dead, maybe in the irons. Eh?"

Only a deep silence answered him, but in the interest which his words excited the terror seemed to have left Ronicky and Gus. They rode close, their heads toward Sliver alone.

"There goes Vic," mused Sliver. "There he goes—go on, Mac, you old fool!—scared to death, ridin' for his life. And why? Because he believes some ghost stories he's heard about Dan Barry!"

"Ghost stories?" echoed Reeve. "Some of 'em ain't fairy tales, Sliver."

"Jest name one that ain't!"

"Well, the way he trailed Jim Silent. We've all heard of Silent, and Barry was too good for him."

"Bah," sneered Sliver. "Too good for Silent?" He lied readily enough: "Booze done for Silent long before Barry come along."

"That right?"

"I'll tell a man it is. Mind you, I don't say Barry ain't handy with his gun; but he's done a little and the gents have furnished the trimmin's. Look here, if Barry is the man-eater they say, why did he pick a time for comin' down when the sheriff was out of town?"

"By God!" exclaimed Ronicky. "I never thought of that!"

"Sure you didn't," chuckled Sliver. "But this sucker figures that you and Gus and me will be easy pickin's. He figures we'll do what Vic did—hit for the tall pines. Then he'll blow around how he ran the four of us out of Alder. Be pleasant comin' back to talk like that, eh?"

There was a volley of rapid curses from the other two.

"We'll get this cheap skate, Sliver," suggested Ronicky. "We'll get this ghost and

tie him up and take him back to Alder and make a show of him."

"We will," nodded Sliver. "Have you figured how?"

"Lie out here in the bush. He'll hunt around Alder all night and when the mornin' comes he'll leave and he'll come out this way. We'll be ready for him where the valley's narrow down there. They say his hoss and his dog is as bad as any two ordinary men. Well, that's three of them and here's three of us. It's an even break, eh?"

"Ronicky," murmured Sliver, "I always knowed you had the brains. We'll take this gent and tame him, and run him back to Alder on the end of a rope."

Gus Reeve whooped and waved his hat at the thought.

So the three reached the point where the shadowy walls of the valley narrowed, drew almost together. There they placed the horses in a hollow near the southern cliff, and they returned to take post. There was only one bridle path which wound through the gulch here, and the three concealed themselves behind a thicket of sage-brush to wait.

They laid their plan carefully. Each man was to have his peculiar duty: Gus Reeve, an adept with the rope, would wait until the black stallion was cantering past and then toss his noose and throw the horse. At the same instant, Ronicky Joe would shoot the wolf-dog, and Sliver Waldron would perforate Dan Barry while the latter rolled in the dust, unless, indeed, he was pinioned by the fall of his horse, in which case they would have the added glory of taking him alive.

By the time all these details were settled the pale moonlight was shot through with the rose of dawn. Then, rapidly, the mountains lifted into view, range beyond range, all their gulleys deep blue and purple, and here and there sharp triangles of snow. There was not a cloud, not a trace of mist, and through the crisp, thin air the vision carried as if through a telescope. They could count the trees on the upper ridges; and that while the floor of the valley was still in shadow. This in turn grew brilliant, and everywhere the sage-brush glittered like foliage carved in grey-green quartz.

It was then that they saw Dan Barry, while the dawn was still around them, and before the sun pushed up in the east above the mountains. He came winding down the bridle path with the dawn glittering on the side of Satan, and a dark, swift form skirting on ahead.

"Look at him!" muttered Sliver Waldron. "The damned wolf is a scout. See him nose around that hummock? Watch him smell behind that bush? The black devil!"

Bart, in fact, wove a loose course before his master, running here and there to all points of vantage, as if he knew that danger lurked ahead, but where he came close, with only the narrow passage between the cliffs, he seemed to make up his animal brain that there could be no trouble in so constricted a place, and darted straight ahead.

"They're ours," whispered Waldron. "Steady, boys. Gus, get your rope; get ready!"

Gus tossed the noose a little wider, and gathered himself for the throw, but it seemed as if the wolf saw or heard the movement. He stopped suddenly and stood with his head high; behind him the rider checked the black horse; all three waited.

"He's tryin' to get the wind," chuckled Waldron, "but the wind is agin our faces!"

It was only a slight breeze, but it came directly against the lurking three; and moreover the scent of the sage was particularly keen at this time of the day, and quite sufficient to blur the scent of man even in the keen nostrils of Black Bart. Only for a second or so he stood there sniffing the wind, a huge animal, larger than any wolf the three had ever seen; his face wise in a certain bear-like fashion from the three grey marks in the center of his forehead. Now he trotted ahead, and the stallion broke into a gallop behind.

"My God," whispered Sliver to Gus, "don't spoil that hoss when you daub the rope on him! Look at that action; like runnin' water!"

They came more rapidly. As if the rider knew that a point of danger was there to be passed, he spoke to his mount, and Satan lengthened into a racing gait that blew the

brim of the rider's hat straight up. On they came. The wolf-dog darted past. Then as the horse swept by, Gus Reeve rose from behind his bush and the rope darted snakelike from his hand. The fore-feet of Satan landed in the noose, and the next instant the back-flung weight of Gus tightened the rope, and Satan shot over upon his side, flinging the master clear of the saddle.

It sent him rolling over and over in the dust, and Sliver Waldron was on his feet with both guns in action, sending bullet after bullet towards the tumbling body. Gus Reeve was running towards the stallion, his rope in action to entangle one of the hind-feet and make sure of his prey; Ronicky Joe had leaped up with a yell and blazed away at Back Bart.

It was no easy mark to strike, for the moment the rope shot out from the hand of Gus, the wolf-dog whirled in his tracks and darted straight for the scene of action. It was that, perhaps, which troubled the aim of Ronicky more than anything else, for wild animals do not whirl in this fashion and run for an assailant. He had expected to find himself plugging away at a flying target in the distance; instead, the black monster was rushing straight toward him, silently.

Indeed, all that followed was in silence after that first wild Indian yell from Ronicky Joe. His gun barked, but Black Bart was running like a football player down a broken field, swerving here and there with uncanny speed. Again, again, Joe missed, and then flung up his arm to ward the flying danger. But Black Bart shot from the ground to make his kill. He could bring down the strongest bull in the herd. What was the arm of a man to him? His snakelike head shot through that futile guard; his teeth cut off the scream of Ronicky Joe. Down they went. The gun flew from the hand of Ronicky; for an instant he struggled with hands and writhing legs, and then the murderous teeth of Bart sank deeper, found the life. The dead body was limp, but Bart, shaking his hold deeper to make sure, glared across to the fallen master.

The third man had died for Grey Molly.

All this had happened in a second, and the body of Barry was still rolling when a gun flashed in his hand, drawn while he tumbled. It spat fire, and Sliver Waldron staggered forward drunkenly, waved both his armed hands as if he were trying to talk by signal, and pitched on his face into the dust.

The fourth man had died for Grey Molly.

No gun was destined for Gus Reeve, however. Black Bart had left the lifeless body of his victim and was darting towards the third man; the master was on his knee, raising his gun for the last shot; but Gus Reeve was blind to all that had happened. He saw only the black stallion, the matchless prize of horseflesh. He tossed a loop in the taut rope to entangle a hind foot, but that slackening of the line gave Satan his instant's purchase, and a moment later he was on his feet, whirled, and two iron-hard hoofs crushed the whole framework of the man's chest like an egg-shell. The impact lifted him from his feet, but before that body struck the ground the life was fled from it.

The fifth man had died for Grey Molly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BAD NEWS.

NEWS of the killing at Alder, as they call that night's slaughter to this day in the mountain-desert, travelled swiftly, and lost nothing of bulk and burden on the way; so that two days later, when Lee Haines went down for mail to the wretched little village in the valley, he heard the store-keeper retailing the story to an awe-stricken group.

How the tale had crossed all the wild mountains which lay between in so brief a space no man could say, but first there ran a whisper and then a stir, and then half a dozen men came in at once, each with an elaboration of the theme more horrible than the last. The store-keeper culled the choicest fragments from every version, strung them together with a narrative of his own fertile invention, polished off the tale by a few rehearsals in his home, and then placed his product on the open market. The very

first day he kept the store-room well filled from dawn until dark.

And this was the creation to which Lee Haines had to listen, impatient, sifting the chaff for the grains of truth. Down upon Alder, exactly at midnight, had ridden a cavalcade headed by that notorious, half-legendary man-slayer, Dan Barry—Whistling Dan. While his crew of twoscore hardened ruffians held the doors and the windows with leveled rifles, Barry had entered with a gun and a wolf—a wild wolf, and had butchered ten men wantonly.

To add to the mystery, there was no motive of robbery for the crime. One sweeping visitation of death, and then the night-riders had rushed away. Nor was this all, for Sheriff Pete Glass, hearing of the tragedy, had ridden to Rickett, the county seat, and from this strategic point of vantage he was sending out a call for the most practised fighters on the mountain-desert. He wanted twenty men, proved beyond the shadow of question for courage, endurance, speed, and surety in action.

"And," concluded the store-keeper, fixing his eye upon Lee Haines, "if you want a long ride free of charge, and ten bucks a day with chow thrown in—some of you gents ought to go to Rickett and chin with Pete."

Haines waited to hear no more. He even forgot to ask for the Barry mail, swung into his saddle, and rode with red spurs back to the cabin in the mountains. There he drew Buck Daniels aside, and they walked among the rocks while Haines told his story. When it was ended they sat on adjoining boulders and chucked pebbles aimlessly into the emptiness beyond the cliff.

"Maybe," said Buck suddenly, "it wasn't Dan at all. He sure wouldn't be ridin' with no crowd of gents like that."

"A fool like that store-keeper could make a crowd of Indians out of one papoose," answered Haines. "It was Dan. Who else would be traipsing around with a dog that looks like a wolf—and hunts men?"

"I remember when Dan cornered Jim Silent in that cabin, and all Jim's gang was with him. Black Bart—"

"Buck," cut in Haines, "you've remembered plenty."

After a moment: "When are you going in to break the news to Kate?"

Buck Daniels regarded him with angry astonishment.

"Me?" he cried. "I'd sooner cut my tongue out!" He drew a great breath. "I feel like—like Dan was dead!"

"The best thing for Kate if he were."

"That's a queer thing to say, Lee. The meat would be rotted off your bones six years ago in Elkhead if it hadn't been for Whistlin' Dan."

"I know it, Buck. But I'll tell you straight that I could never feel towards Dan as if he were a human being, but a wolf in the hide of a man. He turned my blood cold; he always has."

Buck Daniels groaned aloud as thoughts poured back on him.

"Of all the pals that ever a man had," he said sadly, "there never was a partner like Whistlin' Dan. There was never another gent that would go through hell for you jest because you'd eaten meat with him. The first time I met him I tried to double-cross him, because I had my orders from Silent. And Dan played clean with me—by God, he shook hands with me when he left."

He straightened a little.

"So help me God, Lee, I've never done a crooked thing more since I shook hands with Dan that day." He sat silent, but breathing hard. "Well, this is the end of Whistlin' Dan. The law will never let up on him now; but I tell you, Haines, I'm sick inside and I'd give my right hand plumb to the wrist to set him straight and bring him back to Kate. Go in and tell her, Lee. I—I'll wait for you here."

"You'll be damned," cried Haines. "I've done my share by bringing the word this far. You can relay it."

Buck Daniels produced a silver dollar.

"Heads or tails?"

"Heads!" said Haines.

The dollar spun upwards, winking, and clanked on the rocks, tails up. Haines stared at it with a grisly face.

"Good God," he muttered, "what'll I do, Buck, if she faints?"

"Faints?" echoed Daniels, "there's no fear of that! The first thing you'll have to do is to saddle her horse."

"Now, what in hell are you driving at?"

"She'll be thinkin' of Joan. God knows she worried enough because Dan hasn't brought the kid back before this, but when she hears what he's done now, she'll know that he's wild for keeps and she'll be on the trail to bring the young 'un home."

He turned his back cleanly on the house and set his shoulders tense.

"Go on, Lee. Be a man."

He heard the steps of Haines start briskly enough for the house, but they trailed away, slowly and more slowly, and finally there was a long pause.

"He's standing at the door," muttered Buck. "Thank God I ain't in his boots."

He jerked out his papers and tobacco, but in the very act of twisting the cigarette tight the door slammed and he ripped the flimsy thing in two. He started to take another paper, but his fingers were so unsteady that he could not pull away the single sheet of tissue which he wanted. Then his hands froze in place.

A faint tapping came out to him.

"He—he's rapping on her door," whispered Buck, and remained fixed in place, his eyes staring straight before him.

The seconds slipped away.

"He's turned yaller," murmured Buck. "He couldn't do it. It'll be up to me!"

But he had hardly spoken the words when a low cry came out to him from the house. Then the silence again, but Buck Daniels began to mop his forehead.

After that, once, twice, and again he made the effort to turn towards the house, but when he finally succeeded it was whole minutes later, and Lee Haines was leading a saddled horse from the corral. Kate stood beside the cabin, waiting.

When he reached her, she was already mounted. He halted beside her, panting, his hand on her bridle.

"Don't do it, Kate!" he pleaded. "Lemme go with you. Lemme go and try to help."

The brisk wind up the gulch set her clothes fluttering, stirred the hair about the rim of her hat, and she seemed to Buck more gracefully, more beautifully young than he had ever seen her; but her face was like stone.

"You'd be no help," she answered. "When I get to the place I may have to meet—him! Would you face him, Buck?"

His hand fell away from the bridle. It was not so much what she said, as the cold, steady voice with which she spoke that unnerved him. Then, without a farewell, she turned the brown horse around and struck across the meadow at a swift gallop. Buck turned to meet the sick face of Haines.

"Well?" he said.

"Let me have that flask."

Buck produced a metal "life-saver," and Haines with nervous hands unscrewed the top and lifted it to his lips. He lowered it after a long moment and stood bracing himself against the wall.

"It was hell, Buck. God help me if I ever have to go through a thing like that again."

"I see what you done;" said Buck angrily. "You walked right in and took your story in both hands and knocked her down with it. Haines, of all the ornery, thick-headed cayuses I ever see, you're the most outbeatin'est!"

"I couldn't help it."

"Why not?"

"When I went in she took one look at me and then jumped up and stood as straight as a pine tree.

"'Lee,' she said, 'what have you heard?'

"'About what?' I asked her, and I looked sort of indifferent."

"Bah!" snorted Buck, "She could see death an' hell written all over your face, most like."

"I suppose," muttered Haines, "I—I was sick!

"'Tell me!' she said, coming close up.

"'He's gone wild again,' was all I could put my tongue to.

"Then I blurted it out. I had to get rid of the damned story some way, and the quickest way seemed the best—how Dan rode into Alder and did the killing.

"When I got to that she gave one cry."

"I know," said Buck, shuddering. "Like something dying."

"Then she asked me to saddle her horse. I begged her to let me go with her, and she said to me what she just now said to you. And so I stayed. What good could we do against that devil?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MUSIC.

TO the last ravine Kate's horse carried her easily enough, but that mountain pass was impenetrable through all its length to anything except the uncanny agility of Satan, and so she left the cow-pony in the bottom of the gorge and climbed the last rise on foot.

On the mountainside above her, it was not easy to locate the cave, for the slope was clawed into ravines and confused with meaningless criss-cross gulches. Whatever scrub evergreens grew there stood under the shade of boulders which threatened each instant to topple over and go thundering to the base. She had come upon the cave by chance in her ride with Dan, and now she hunted vainly through the great stones for the entrance. A fresh wind, chill with the snows of the upper peaks, pulled and tugged at her and cut her face and hands with flying bits of sand. It kept up a whistling so insistent that it was some time before she recognized in the hum of the gale a differing note, not of pleasant music, but a thin, shrill sound that blended with the voice of the wind.

The instant she heard it she stopped short on the leeside of a tall rock and looked about her in terror. The mountains walked away on every side, and those resolute masses gave her courage. She listened, for the big rock cut away the breath of the wind about her ears and she could make out the whistling more clearly. It was a strain as delicate as a pin-point ray of light in a dark room, but it made Kate tremble.

Until the sound ended she stayed there by the rock, hearkening, but the moment it ceased she gathered her resolution with a great effort and went straight toward the source of the whistling. It was only a moment away, although the wind had made it seem farther, and she came on the tall, narrow opening with Joan sitting on a rock just within.

Instead of the blue cloak, she was wrapped in a tawny hide, and the yellow hair blew this way and that unsheltered from the wind. The loneliness of the little figure made Kate's heart ache, made her pause on her way, and while she hesitated, Joan's head rested back against the rock, her eyes half closed, her lips pursed, she began to whistle that same keen, eery music.

It brought Kate to her in a rush.

"Oh Joan!" she cried. "My baby!"

And she would have swept the child into her arms, but Joan slipped out from under her very fingers and stood a little distance off with her hands pressed against the wall on either side of her, ready to dart one way or the other. It was not sudden terror, but rather a resolute determination to struggle against capture to the end, and her blue eyes were blazing with excitement. Kate was on her knees with her arms held out.

"Joan, dear, have you forgotten munner?"

The wildness flickered away from the eyes of the child little by little.

"Munner?" she repeated dubiously.

No shout of welcome, no sudden rush, no arms to fling about her mother. But if her throat was dry and closed Kate allowed no sign of it to creep into her voice.

"Where's Daddy Dan?"

"He's gone away."

"Where?"

"Oh—over there!"

The mother rose slowly to her feet and looked out across the mountains as if in search of aid. For her mind had harked back to that story her father used to tell of the coming of Dan Barry; how he had ridden across the hills one evening and saw, walking against the sunset, a tattered boy who whistled strangely as he went, and when old Joe Cumberland asked where he was going he had only waved a vague hand toward the north and answered "Oh—over there."

It was sufficient destination for him; it was sufficient explanation now for the child. She remembered how she, herself a child then, had sat at her father's table and watched the brown face of the strange boy

with fascination, and the wild, quick eyes which went everywhere and rested in no one place. They were the eyes which looked up to her now from Joan's face, and she felt suddenly divorced from her baby, as if all the blood in Joan were the blood of her father.

"He left you here alone?" she murmured.

The child looked at her with a sort of curious amazement.

"Joan isn't alone."

She whistled softly, and around the corner of the rock peered two tiny, beady-bright eyes, and the sharp nose of a coyote puppy. It disappeared at once at the sight of the stranger, and now all the strength went from Kate. She slipped helplessly down, and sat on a boulder trying to think, trying to master the panic which chilled her; for she thought of the day when Dan brought home to the Cumberland Ranch the wounded wolf-dog, Black Bart.

But the call of Joan had traveled far, and now a squirrel came in at a gallop with his vast tail bobbing behind him, and ran right up the rock until he was on the shoulder of the child. From this point of vantage, however, he saw Kate, and was instantly on the floor of the cave and scurrying for the entrance, chattering with rage.

The wild things came to Joan as they came to her father, and the eyes of the child were the eyes of Dan Barry. It came home to Kate and she saw the truth for the first time in her life. She had struggled to win him away from his former life, but now she knew that it was not habit which controlled him, for he was wild by instinct, by nature. Just the tang of his untamed blood had turned the child to this; and a few days more of life with him would leave her wild forever.

"He left you alone here!" she repeated fiercely. "Where a thousand things might happen. Thank God I've found you."

Even if her words conveyed little meaning to Joan, the intonation carried a message which was perfectly clear.

"Don't you like Daddy Dan?"

"Joan, Joan, I love him! Of course."

But Joan sat with a dubious eye which quickly darkened into fear.

"Oh, munner, don't take us back!"

Such horror and terror and sadness mixed! The tears rushed into the eyes of Kate.

"Do you want to stay here, sweetheart?"

"Yes, munner."

"Without me?"

At first Joan shook her head decidedly, but thereafter she quickly became thoughtful.

"No, except when we eat."

"You don't want me here at dinner-time? Poor munner will get so hungry."

A great concession was about to burst from the remorseful lips of Joan, but again second thought sobered her. She remained in a quandary, unable to speak.

"Don't you want me even when you wake up at night?"

"Why?"

"Because you're so afraid of the dark."

"Joan's not afraid. Oh, no! Joan loves the dark."

If Kate maintained a smile, it was a frozen grimace. It had only been a few days—hardly yesterday—that Joan left, and already she was a little stranger. Suppose Dan should refuse to come back himself; refuse even to give up Joan! She started up, clutching the hand of the child.

"Quick, Joan, we must go!"

"Joan doesn't want to go!"

"We'll go—for a little walk. We—we'll surprise Daddy Dan."

"But Daddy Dan won't come back for long, long time. Not till the sun is away down behind that hill."

That should mean two hours, at least, thought Kate. She could wait a little.

"Joan, what taught you not to be afraid of the dark?"

This problem made Joan look about her for an answer, but at length she called softly: "Jackie!"

She waited, and then whistled; at once the bright eyes of the little coyote appeared around the edge of the rock.

"Come here!" she commanded.

He slunk out with his head turned towards Kate and cowered at the feet of the child. And the mother cringed inwardly at the sight; all wild things which hated man instinctively with tooth and claw were

the friends, the allies of Whistling Dan, and now Joan was stepping in her father's path. A little while longer and the last vestige of gentleness would pass from her. She would be like Dan Barry, following calls which no other human could even hear. It meant one thing: at whatever cost, Joan must be taken from Dan and kept away.

"Jackie sleeps near me," Joan was saying. "We can see in the dark, can't we, Jackie?" There was a luminous flare in the child's eyes as she bent over the beast.

She lifted her head, and the moment her compelling eyes left him, Jackie scooted for shelter. The first strangeness had worn away from Joan and she began to chatter away about life in the cave, and how Satan played there by the firelight with Black Bart, and how, sometimes—wonderful sight! Daddy Dan played with them. The recital was quite endless as they pushed farther and farther into the shadows, and it was the uneasiness which the dim light raised in her that made Kate determine that the time had come to go home.

"Now," she said, "we're going for that walk."

"Not away down there!" cried Joan.

Kate winced.

"It's lots nicer here, munner. You'd ought to just see what we have to eat! And my, Daddy Dan knows how to fix things."

"Of course he does. Now put on your hat and your cloak, Joan."

"This is lots warmer, munner."

"Don't you like it?" she added in alarm, stroking the delicate fur.

"Take it off!"

Kate ripped away the fastenings and tossed the skin far away.

"Oh!" breathed Joan.

"It isn't clean! It isn't clean," cried Kate. "Oh, my poor, darling baby! Get your bonnet and your cloak, Joan, quickly."

"We're coming back?"

"Of course."

Joan trudged obediently to the side of the cave and produced both articles, sadly rumpled, and Kate buttoned her into them with trembling fingers. Something akin to cold made her shake now. It was very much like a child's fear of the dark.

But as she turned towards the entrance to the cave and caught the hand of Joan, the child wrenched herself free.

"We'll never come back," she wailed. "Munner, I won't go!"

"Joan, come to me this instant."

"I won't go!"

"Joan!"

A resolute silence answered her, and when she went threateningly forward, Joan shrank into the shadow near the rock. It was the play of light striking slantwise from the entrance, no doubt, but it seemed to Kate that a flicker of yellow light danced across the eyes of the child. And it stopped Kate—took her breath with a new terror.

Dan Barry, in the old days, had lived a life as quiet as a summer's day until the time Jim Silent struck him down in the saloon; and she remembered how Black Bart had come for her and led her to the saloon, and how she found Dan lying on the floor, streaked with blood, very pale; and how she had kneeled by him in a panic, and how his eyes had opened and stared at her without answer and the yellow, inhuman light swirled in them until she rose and backed out the door and fled in a hysteria of fear up the road.

That had been the beginning of the end for Dan Barry, that instant when his eyes changed; and now Joan—she ran at her swiftly and gathered her into her arms. One instant of wild struggling, and then the child lay still, her head straightened a little, a shrill whistle pealed through the cave.

Kate stopped that piercing call with her hand, but when she turned she saw in the entrance the dark body of Bart and his narrow, snakelike head.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BATTLE.

"IT'S Dan," whispered Kate. "He's come."

"Maybe Daddy Dan sent Bart back alone, munner."

"Does he do that often? Come quickly, Joan. Run!"

She ran towards the entrance, stumbling over the uneven ground and dragging Joan

behind her, but when they came close the wolf-dog bristled and sent down the cavern a low growl that stopped them like an invisible barrier.

The softest sounds in his register were ominous warnings to those who did not know Black Bart, but Kate and Joan understood that this muttering, harsh thunder, was an ultimatum. If she had worn her revolver, a light, beautifully mounted thirty-two which Dan had given her, Kate would have shot the wolf and gone on across his body; for she had learned from Whistling Dan to shoot quickly as one points a finger and straight by instinct.

Even as she stood there barehanded she looked about her desperately for a weapon, seeing the daylight and the promise of escape beyond and only this dumb beast between her and freedom.

Once before, many a year ago, she had gone like this, with empty hands, and subdued Black Bart simply through the power of quiet courage and the human eye. She determined to try again.

"Stand there quietly, Joan. Don't move until I tell you."

She made a firm step towards Bart.

"Munner, he'll bite!"

"Hush, Joan. Don't speak."

At her forward movement the wolf-dog flattened his belly to the rock, and she saw his forepaws, large, almost, as the hands of a man, dig and work for a purchase from which he could throw himself at her throat.

"Steady, Bart!"

His silence was more terrible than a snarl; yet she stretched out her hand and made another step. It brought a sharp tensing of the body of Bart—the fur stood up about his throat like the mane of a lion, and his eyes were a devilish green. Another instant she kept her place, and then she remembered the story of Haines—how Bart had gone with his master to that killing at Alder. If he had killed once he would kill again; wild as he had been on that other time when she quelled him, he had never before been like this.

The courage melted out of her; she forgot the pleasant day outside; she saw only those blazing eyes and shrank back towards the center of the cave. The muscles of the wolf relaxed visibly, and not till that moment did she realize how close she had been to the crisis.

"Bad Bart!" cried Joan, running in between. "Bad, bad dog!"

"Stop, Joan! Don't go near him!" Kate called out.

But Joan was already almost to Bart. When Kate would have run to snatch the child away that deep, rattling growl stopped her again, and now she saw that Joan ran not the slightest danger. She stood beside the huge beast with her tiny fist raised.

"I'll tell Daddy Dan on you," she shrilled.

Black Bart made a furtive, cringing movement towards the child, but instantly stiffened again and sent his warning down the cave to Kate. Then a shadow fell across the entrance and Dan stood there with Satan walking behind. His glance ran from the bristling body of Bart to Kate, shrinking among the shadows, and lingered without a spark of recognition.

"Satan," he ordered, "go on in to your place."

The black stallion glided past the master and came on until he saw Kate. He stopped, snorting, and then circled her with his head suspiciously high, and ears back until he reached the place where his saddle was usually hung.

There he waited, and Kate felt the eyes of the horse, the wolf, the man, and even Joan, curiously upon her.

"Evenin'," nodded Dan; "might you have come up for supper?"

That was all. Not a step towards her, not a smile, not a greeting, and between them stood Joan, her hands clasped idly before her while she looked from face to face, trying to understand. All the pangs of heart which come to woman between girlhood and old age went burningly through Kate in that breathing space, and afterwards she was cold, and saw herself and all the others clearly.

"I haven't come for supper. I've come to bring you back, Dan."

Not that she had the slightest hope that he would come, but she watched him curiously, almost as if he were a stranger, to see how he would answer.

"Come back?" he echoed. "To the cabin?"

"Where else?"

"It ain't happy there." He started. "You come up here with us, Kate."

"And raise Joan like a young animal in a cave?"

He looked at her with wonder, and then at the child.

"Ain't you happy, Joan, up here?"

"Oh, Daddy Dan, Joan's *so* happy!"

"You see," he said to Kate, "she's terribly happy."

It was his utter simplicity which convinced her that arguments and pleas would be perfectly useless. Just behind the cool command which she kept over herself now was hysteria. She knew that if she relaxed her purposefulness for an instant the love for him would rush over her, weaken her. She kept her mind clear and steady with a great effort which was like divorcing herself from herself. When she spoke, there was another being which stood aside listening in wonder to the words.

"You've chosen this life, Dan. I won't blame you for leaving me this time any more than I blamed you the other times. I suppose it isn't you. It's the same impulse, after all, that took you south after—after the wild geese." She stopped, almost broken down by the memory, and then recalled herself sternly. "It's the same thing that led you away after Mac Strann through the storm. But whether it's a weakness in you or the force of something outside your control, I see this thing clearly; we can't go on. This is the end."

He seemed troubled, vaguely, as a dog is anxious when it sees a child weep and cannot make out the reason.

"Oh, Dan," she burst out, "I love you more than ever! If it were I alone I'd follow you to the end of the world, and live as you live, and do as you do. But it's Joan. She has to be raised as a child should be raised. She isn't going to live with—with wild horses and wolves all her life. And if she stays on here, don't you see that the same thing which is a curse in you will grow strong and be a curse in her? Don't you see it growing? It's in her eyes! Her step is too light. She's lost her fear of the dark. She's drifting back into wildness. Dan, she has to go with me back to the cabin!"

At that she saw him start again, and his hand went out with a swift, subtle gesture towards Joan.

"Let me have her! I have to have her! She's mine!" Then more gently: "You can come to see her whenever you will. And, finally pray God you will come and stay with us always."

He had stepped to Joan while she spoke, and his hands made a quick movement of cherishing about her golden head, without touching it. For the first and the last time in her life, she saw something akin to fear in his eyes.

"Kate, I can't come back. I got things to do—out here!"

"Then let me take her."

She watched the wavering in him.

"Things would be kind of empty if she was gone, Kate."

"Why?" she asked bitterly. "You say you have your work to do—out here?"

He considered this gravely.

"I dunno. Except that I sort of need her."

She knew from of old that such questions only puzzled him, and soon he would cast away the attempt to decide, and act. Action was his sphere. There was only one matter in which he was unfailingly, relentlessly the same, and that was justice. To that sense in him she would make her last appeal.

"Dan, I can't take her. I only ask you to see that I'm right. She belongs to me. I bought her with pain."

It was a staggering blow to Whistling Dan. He took off his sombrero and passed his hand slowly across his forehead, then looked at her with a dumb appeal.

"I only want you to do the thing you think is square, Dan."

Once more he winced.

Then, slowly—"I'm tryin' to be square. Tryin' hard. I know you got a claim in her. But it seems like I have, too. She's like a part of me, mostly. When she's happy, I feel like smilin' sort of. When she cries it hurts me so's I can't hardly stand it."

He paused, looking wistfully from the staring child to Kate.

He said with sudden illumination, "Let her do the judgin'! You ask her to go to you, and I'll ask her to come to me. Ain't that square?"

For a moment Kate hesitated, but as she looked at Joan it seemed to her that when she stretched out her arms to her baby nothing in the world could keep them apart.

"It's fair," she answered. Dan dropped to one knee.

"Joan, you got to make up your mind. If you want to stay with—with Satan—speak up, Satan!"

The stallion whinnied softly, and Joan smiled.

"With Satan and Black Bart"—the wolf-dog had glided near, and now stood watching—"and with Daddy Dan, you just come to me. But if you want to go to—to munner, you just go." On his face the struggle showed—the struggle to be perfectly just. "If you stay here, maybe it'll be cold, sometimes when the wind blows, and maybe it'll be hard other ways. And if you go to munner, she always be takin' care of you, and no harm'll ever come to you, and you'll sleep soft between sheets, and if you wake up in the night she'll be there to talk to you. And you'll have pretty little dresses with all kinds of colors on 'em, most like. Joan, do you want to go to munner, or stay here with me?"

Perhaps the speech was rather long for Joan to follow, but the conclusion was plain enough; and there was Kate, she also upon one knee and her arms stretched out.

"Joan, my baby, my darling!"

"Munner!" whispered the child and ran towards her.

A growl came up in the throat of Black Bart and then sank away into a whine; Joan stopped short, and turned her head.

"Joan!" cried Kate.

Anguish made her voice loud, and from the loudness Joan shrank, for there was never a harsh sound in the cave except the growl of Bart warning away danger. She turned quite around and there stood Daddy Dan, perfectly erect, quite indifferent, to all seeming, as to her choice. She went to him with a rush and caught at his hands.

"Oh, Daddy Dan, I don't want to go. Don't you want Joan?" He laid a hand upon her head, and she felt the tremor of his fingers; the wolf-dog lay down at her feet and looked up in her face; Satan, from the shadows beyond, whinnied again.

After that there was not a word spoken, for Kate looked at the picture of the three, saw the pity in the eyes of Whistling Dan, saw the wonder in the eyes of Joan, saw the truth of all she had lost. She turned towards the entrance and went out, her head bowed, stumbling over the pebbles.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TEST.

THE most that could be said of Rickett was that it had a courthouse and plenty of quiet so perfect that the minds of the office-holders could turn and turn and hear no sound saving their own turning. There were, of course, more buildings than the courthouse, but not so many that they could not be grouped conveniently along one street. The hush which rested over Rickett was never broken except in the periods immediately after the spring and fall round-ups when the saloons and gaming tables were suddenly flooded with business. Otherwise it was a rare event indeed which injected excitement into the village.

Such an event was the gathering of Sheriff Pete Glass's posse.

There had been other occasions when Pete and officers before his time had combed the county to get the cream of the fighting men, but the gathering of the new posse became different in many ways. In the first place the call for members was not confined to the county, for though it stretched as large as many a minor European kingdom, it had not the population of a respectable manufacturing town, and Pete Glass went far beyond its bounds to get his trailers.

Everywhere he had the posters set up and on the posters appeared the bait. The state began the game with a reward of

three thousand dollars; the county plastered two thousand dollars on top of that to make it an even five—then the town of Alder dug into its deep pockets and produced twenty-five hundred, while disinterested parties added contributions which swelled the total to a round ten thousand.

Ten thousand dollars reward for the man described below, dead or alive. Ten thousand dollars which might be earned by the investment of a single bullet and the pressure on a trigger; and above this the fame which such a deed would bring—no wonder that the mountain-desert hummed through all its peaks and plains, and stirred to life. Moreover, the news had gone abroad, the tale of the killing at Alder and everything that went before.

It went west; it appeared in newspapers; it cropped up at firesides; it gave a spark of terror to a myriad conversations; and everyone in Rickett felt that the eye of the nation was upon it; everyone in Rickett dreamed nightly of the man described: "Daniel Barry, called Whistling Dan, about five feet nine or ten, slender, black hair, brown eyes, age about thirty years."

Secretly, Rickett felt perfectly convinced that Sheriff Pete Glass alone could handle this fellow and trim his claws, for they knew how many a "bad man" had built a reputation high as Babel and baffled posses and murdered right and left, until the little dusty man on the little dusty roan went out alone and came back alone, and another fierce name went from history into legend.

However, there were doubters, since this affair had new earmarks. It had been buzzed abroad that Whistling Dan was not only the hunted, but also the hunter, and that he had pledged himself to strike down all the seven who first took his trail. Five of these were already gone; two remained, and of these two one was Vic Gregg, no despicable fighter himself, and the other was no less than the invincible little sheriff himself.

To imagine the sheriff beaten in the speed of his draw, or the accuracy of his shot was to imagine the First Cause, Infinity, or whatever else is inconceivable; nevertheless, there were such possibilities as bullets fired at night through the window, and attacks from the rear. So Rickett waited, and held its breath and kept its eyes rather more behind than in front.

In the mean time there was no lack of amusement, for from the four corners, blown by the four winds, men rode out of the mountain-desert and drifted into Rickett to seek for a place on that posse. Twenty men—that was the goal the sheriff had set. Twenty men trained to a hair. Beside the courthouse was a shooting gallery not overmuch used except during the two annual seasons of prosperity and reckless spending, and Pete Glass secured this place to test out applicants.

After they passed this trial they were mustered into his presence, and he gave them an examination for himself. Just what he asked them or what he told them could never be known, but some men came from his presence very red, and others extremely pale, and some men blustered, and some men swore, and some men rode hastily out of town and spoke not a word, but few, very few, were those who came out wearing a little badge on their vest with the pride of a Knight of the Garter.

At first the hordes rode in, young and old, youths keen for a taste of adventure, rusty fellows who had once been noted warriors; but these early levies soon discovered that courage and willingness was not so much valued as accuracy, and the old-timers learned, also, that accuracy must be accompanied by speed; and even when a man possessed both these qualities of hand and eye the gentle, inscrutable little man in his office might still reject them for reasons they could not guess.

This one thing was certain—the next time Pete Glass ran for office he would be beaten even by a greaser. He made enemies at the rate of a hundred a day during that period of selection.

Still the twenty was not recruited to the full. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen were gathered into the fold, but still five men were lacking to complete the toll. Most men would have started their man-hunt with that formidable force, but Pete Glass was methodical. In his own heart of hearts

he would have given his hope of heaven to meet Barry face to face and hand to hand, and see which was the better man, but Pete Glass owed a duty to his state before he owed a duty to himself. He stuck by his first plan. And every day the inhabitants of Rickett gathered at the shooting gallery to watch the tests and wonder at the successes and smile at the failures.

It was a very hard test which the sheriff had imposed. A man stood to one side of the iron-plate back wall, which served as the target. He stood entirely out of sight and through an aperture in the side wall, at a signal, he tossed a round ball of clay, painted white. The marksman stood a good ten paces off, and he must strike that clay ball as it passed across the target. The balls were so small that even to strike them when they were stationary was a difficult task, and to hit them in motion was enough to task the quickest eye and the cunningest hand.

It was old Pop Giersberg who stood with his ancient forty-five behind the counter, with his feet braced, on this bright morning, and behind him half of Rickett was gathered.

"D'you give me warnin', son?" he inquired of the man at the counter.

"Nary a warnin'," grinned the other, who was one of the chosen fifteen.

He wished Pop well. So did they all, but they had seen every man fail for two days at that target and one and all they had their doubts. Pop had been a formidable man in his day, but now his hand was stiff and his hair gray. He was at least twenty years older than he felt.

He had hardly finished asking his question when a white ball was tossed across the target. Up came the gun of Pop Giersberg, exploded, and the bullet clanged on the iron; the white ball floated idly on across the wall and disappeared on the other side.

"Gimme another chance!" pleaded Pop, with a quaver in his voice. "That was just a try to get my eye in shape."

"Sure," chuckled the deputy. "Everybody gets three tries. It ain't hardly nacheral to hit that ball the first crack. Leastways, nobody ain't done it yet. You jest keep your eye peeled, Pop, and that ball will come out again."

And Pop literally kept his eye peeled.

He had double reasons to pray for success, for his "old woman" had smiled and shook her head when he allowed that he would try out for a place on that posse. All his nerves grew taut and keen. He waited.

Once more the white streak appeared and surely he who threw the ball had every wish to see Pop succeed, for he tossed it high and easily. Again the gun barked from Giersberg's hand, and again the ball dropped almost slowly out of sight.

"It's a trick!" gasped Pop. "It's something damned queer."

"They's a considerable pile of gents that think the same way you do," admitted the deputy sheriff dryly.

Pop glared at him and gritted his teeth.

"Lead the damn thing on agin," he said, and muttered the rest of his sentence to himself. He jerked his hat lower over his eyes, spread his feet a little more, and got ready for the last, desperate chance.

But fate was against Pop. Twenty years before he might have struck that mark if he had been in top condition, but to-day, though he put his very soul into the effort, and though the ball for the third time was lobbed with the utmost gentleness through the air, his bullet banged vainly against the sheet of iron and the white, inoffensive ball continued on its way.

Words came in the throat of Pop, reached his opened mouth, and died there. He thrust the gun back into its holster, and turned slowly toward the crowd. There was no smile to meet his challenging eye, for Pop was a known man, and though he might have failed to strike this elusive mark that was no sign that he would fail to hit something six feet in height by a couple in breadth. When he found that no mockery awaited him, a sheepish smile began at his eyes and wandered dimly to his lips.

"Well, gents," he muttered, "I guess I ain't as young as I was once. S'-long!"

He shouldered his way to the door and was gone.

"That's about all, friends," said the

deputy crisply. "I guess there ain't any more clamorin's for a place to-day?"

He swept the crowd with a complacent eye.

"If you got no objection," murmured a newcomer, who had just slipped into the room, "I'd sort of like to take a shot at that."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SIXTH MAN.

IT caused a quick turning of heads.

"I don't want to put you out none," said the applicant gently. His voice was extremely gentle, and there was about him all the shrinking aloofness of the naturally timid. The deputy looked him over with quiet amusement—slender fellow with the gentlest brown eyes—and then with a quick side-glance invited the crowd to get in on the joke.

"You ain't puttin' me out," he assured the other. "Not if you pay for your own ammunition."

"Oh, yes," answered the would-be man-hunter. "I reckon I could afford that."

He was so serious about it that the crowd murmured its amusement instead of bursting into loud laughter. If the man was a fool, at least he was not aggressive in his folly. They gave way and he walked slowly towards the counter and stepped into the little open space beside the master of ceremonies. Very obviously he was ill at ease to find himself the center of so much attention.

"I s'pose you been practisin' up on tin-cans?" suggested the deputy, leaning on the counter.

"Sometimes I hit things and sometimes I don't," answered the stranger.

"Well"—and this was put more crisply as the deputy brought out a large pad of paper—"jest gimme your name, partner."

"Joe Cumber." He grew still more ill at ease. "I hear that even if you hit the mark you got to talk to the sheriff himself afterward?"

"Yep."

The applicant sighed.

"Why d'you ask?"

"I ain't much on words."

"But hell with your gun, eh?" The deputy grinned again, but when the other turned his head toward him his smile went out, suddenly, while the wrinkle of mirth still lay in his cheek. The deputy stroked his chin and looked thoughful.

"Get your gun ready," he ordered.

The other slipped his hand down to his gun-butt and moved his weapon to make sure that it was loose in the leather.

"Ain't you goin' to take your gun out?" queried the deputy.

"Can I do that?"

"I reckon not," said the deputy, and looked the stranger straight in the eyes.

His change to deadly earnestness put a hush over the crowd.

Across the target, not tossed easily as it had been for Pop Giersberg, but literally thrown, darted the line of white, while the gun flipped out of its holster as if it possessed life of its own, and spoke. The white line ended half way to the farther side of the target, and the revolver slid again into hiding.

A clamor of amazement broke from the crowd, but the deputy looked steadily, without enthusiasm, at the stranger.

"Joe Cumber," he said, when the noise fell away a little, "I guess you'll see the sheriff. Harry, take Joe Cumber up to Pete, will you?"

One of the bystanders jumped at the suggestion and led the other from the room, with a full half of the crowd following. The deputy remained behind, thoughtful.

"What's the matter?" asked a spectator. "You look like you'd seen a ghost."

"Gents," answered the deputy, "do any of you recollect seein' this feller before?"

They did not.

"They's something queer about him," muttered the deputy.

"He may be word-shy," proffered a wit, "but he sure aint gun-shy!"

"When he looked at me," said the deputy, more to himself than to the others, "it seemed to me like they was a swirl of yaller come into his eyes. Made me feel like someone had sneaked up behind me with a knife."

In his thoughtfulness his eyes wandered,

and wandering, they fell upon the notice of the reward for the capture, dead or alive, of Daniel Barry, about five feet nine or ten, slender, with black hair and brown eyes.

"My God!" cried the deputy.

But then he relaxed against the counter.

"It ain't possible," he murmured.

"What ain't possible?"

"However, I'm goin' to go and hang around. Gents, I got a crazy idea."

He had no sooner started toward the door than he seemed to gain surety out of the motion.

"It's him!" he cried. He turned toward the others, white of face. "Come on, all of you! It's him! Barry!"

But in the mean time "Harry" had gone on swiftly to the office of the sheriff with "Joe Cumber." Behind him swirled the curious crowd and for their benefit he asked his questions loudly.

"Partner, that was sure a pretty play you made. I've seen 'em all try out to crack them balls, but I never seen none do it the way you did—with your gun in the leather at the start. What part of the country might you be from?"

The other answered gently, "Why, from over yonder."

"The T O outfit, eh?"

"Beyond that."

"Up in the Gray Mountains? That so! I s'pose you been on trails like this before?"

"Nothin' to talk about."

There might have been a double meaning in this remark, and Harry looked twice to make sure that there was no guile.

"Well, here we are." He threw open a door which revealed a baldheaded clerk seated at a desk in a little bare room. "Billy, here's a gent that cracked it the first whack and started his gun from the leather, by God. He—"

"Jest kindly close the door, Harry," said Billy. "Step in, partner. Gimme your name?"

The door closed on the discomfited Harry, and "Joe Cumber" stood close to it, apparently driven to shrinking into the wall in his embarrassment, but while he stood there his hand fumbled behind him and turned the key in the lock, and then extracted it.

"My name's Joe Cumber."

"Joe Cumber"—this while inscribing it.

"Age?"

"About thirty-two, maybe."

"Don't you know?"

"I don't, exactly."

His eyes were as vague as his words, gentle, and smiling.

"Thirty-two?" said Billy sharply. "You look more like twenty-five to me. S'pose we split the difference, eh?"

And with a grin he wrote: "Age twenty-two or three."

"Business?"

"Trapper."

"Good! The sheriff is pretty keen for 'em. You gents in that game got a sort of nose for the trail, mostly. All right, Cumber, you'll see Glass."

He stood at the door.

"By the way, Cumber, is that straight about startin' your shot with your gun in the holster?"

"I s'pose it is."

"You s'pose?" grunted the clerk. "Well come on in?"

He banged once on the door and then threw it open.

"Joe Cumber, Pete. And he drilled the ball startin' his gun out of the leather. Here's his card."

He closed the door, and once more the stranger stood almost cringing against it, and once more his fingers deftly turned the key—softly, silently—and extracted it from the lock.

The sheriff had not looked up from the study of the card, for reading was more difficult to him than man-killing, and Joe Cumber had an opportunity to examine the room. It was hung with a score of pictures. Some large, some small, but most of them enlargements, it was apparent, of kodak snapshots, for the eyes had that bleary look which comes in photographs spread over ten times their intended space. The faces had little more than bleary eyes in common, for there were bearded men, and smooth shaven faces, and lean and fat men; there were round, cherubic countenances, and lean, hungry heads; there were squared, protruding chins, and there were chins which sloped away awkwardly

toward the neck; in fact it seemed that the sheriff had collected twenty specimens to represent every phase of weakness and strength in the human physiognomy.

But beneath the pictures, almost without exception, there hung weapons—rifles, revolvers, knives, placed crisscross in a decorative manner, and it came to "Joe Cumber" that he was looking at the galaxy of the dead who had fallen by the hand of Sheriff Pete Glass. Not a face meant anything to him but he knew, instinctively, that they were the chosen badmen of the past twenty years.

"So you're Joe Cumber?"

The sheriff turned in his swivel chair and tossed his cigarette butt through the window. "What can I do for you?"

"I got an idea, sheriff, that maybe you'd sort of like to have my picture."

The sheriff looked up from his study of the card, and having looked up his eyes remained riveted. The other no longer cringed with embarrassment, but every line of his body breathed a great happiness. He was like one who has been riding joyously, with a sharp wind in his face.

There was a distant rushing of feet, a pounding on the door of the next room.

"What's that?" muttered the sheriff, his attention called away.

"They want me."

"Wait a minute," called the voice of Billy without.

"I'll open the door. By God, it's locked!"

"They want me—five feet nine or ten, slender, black hair and brown eyes—"

"Barry!"

"Glass, I've come for you."

"And I'm ready. And I'll say this"—he was standing, now, and his nervous hands were at his sides—"I been hungerin' and hopin' for this time to come. Barry, before you die, I want to thank you!"

"You've follered me like a skunk," said Barry, "from the time you killed a hoss that had never done no harm to you. You got on my trail when I was livin' peaceable."

There was a tremendous beating on the outer door of the other room, but Barry went on: "You took a gent that was livin' straight and you made a sneak and a crook out of him and sent him to double-cross me. You ain't worth livin'. You've spent your life huntin' men, and now you're at the end of your trail. Think it over. You're ready to kill again, but are you ready to die?"

The little dusty man grew dustier still. His mouth worked. "Damn you," he whispered, and went for his gun.

It was out, his finger on the trigger, the barrel whipping into line, when the weapon in Barry's hand exploded. The sheriff spun on his heel and fell on his face. Three times, as he lay there, dead in all except the instinctive movement of his muscles, his right hand clawed at his empty holster. The sixth man had died for Grey Molly.

The outer door of Billy's room crashed to the floor, and heavy feet thundered nearer. Barry ran to the window and whistled once, very high and thin. It brought a black horse racing around a corner nearby; it brought a wolf-dog from an opposite direction, and as they drew up beneath the window, he slid out and dropped lightly, catlike, to the ground. One leap brought him to the saddle, and Satan stretched out along the street.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

FANCY

FANCY, in full motley clad,
Roams through all seasons, grim or glad;
Fleet as the wind o'er sea and land,
Free-footed as a gipsy band;
To rule or reason disinclined—
A dream-born vagrant of the mind.

William Hamilton Hayne.

The Seventh Man

Part V

by Max Brand

Author of "Trailin'," "The Guide to Happiness," "Tiger," etc.

A Sequel to "The Untamed" and "The Night Horseman."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BLOOD OF THE FATHER.

ON the night of her failure at the cave, Kate came back to the cabin and went to her room without any word to Buck or Lee Haines, but when they sat before the fire, silent, or only murmuring, they could hear her moving about. Whatever sleep they got before morning was not free from dreams, for they knew that something was impending, and after breakfast they learned what it was.

She struck straight out from the shoulder. She was going up to the cave, and if Dan was away she would take Joan by force; she needed help; would they give it? They sat for a long time, looking at each other, and then avoiding Kate with their eyes. It was not the fear of death, but of something more which both of them connected with the figure of Whistling Dan. It was not until she took her light cartridge-belt from the wall and buckled on her gun that they rose to follow. Before the first freshness of the morning passed they were winding up the side of the mountain, Kate a little in the lead, for she alone knew the way.

Where they rounded the shoulder, the men reined the horses with which Kate had provided them and sat looking solemnly at each other.

"Maybe we'll have no chance to talk alone again," said Lee Haines. "This is the last trail either for Barry or for us. And I don't think that Barry is that close to the end of his rope. Buck, give me your hand and say good-by. All that a man can do against Whistling Dan, and that isn't much, I'll do. Having you along won't make us a whit stronger."

"Thanks," growled Buck Daniels. "Jest save that kind farewell till I show yaller. Hurry up, she's gettin' too far ahead."

At the bottom of the ravine, where they dismounted for the precipitous slope above, Kate showed her first hesitation.

"You both know what it means?" she asked them.

"We sure do," replied Buck.

"Dan will find out that you've helped me, and then he'll never forgive you. Will you risk even that?"

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for October 1.

"Kate," broke in Lee Haines, "don't stop for questions. Keep on and we'll follow. I don't *want* to think of what may happen."

She turned without a word and went up the steep incline.

"What d'you think of your soft girl now?" panted Buck at the ear of Haines. The latter flashed a significant look at him, but said nothing. They reached the top of the cañon wall and passed on among the boulders.

Kate had drawn back to them, now, and they walked as cautiously as if there were dried leaves underfoot. She had only lifted a finger of warning, and they knew that they were near to the crisis. She came to the great rock around which she had first seen the entrance to the cave on the day before. Inch by inch, with Buck and Lee following her example, they worked toward the edge of the boulder and peered carefully around it.

There opened the cave, and in front of it was Joan playing with what seemed to be a ball of gray fur. Her hair tumbled loose and bright about her shoulders; she wore the tawny hide which Kate had seen before, and on her feet, since the sharp rocks had long before worn out her boots, she had daintily fashioned moccasins. Bare knees, profusely scratched, bare arms rapidly browning to the color of the fur she wore, Haines and Buck had to rub their eyes and look again before they could recognize her.

They must have made a noise—perhaps merely an intaking of breath inaudible even to themselves, but clear to the ears of Joan. She was on her feet, with bright, wild eyes glancing here and there. There was no suggestion of childishness in her, but a certain willingness to flee from a great danger or attack a weaker force.

She stood alert, rather than frightened, with her head back as if she scented the wind to learn what approached. The ball of gray fur straightened into the sharp ears and the flashing teeth of a coyote puppy. Buck Daniels's foot slipped on a pebble, and at the sound the coyote darted to the shadow of a little shrub and crouched there, hardly distinguishable from the shade which covered it, and the child, with infinitely cunning instinct, raced to a patch of yellow sand and tawny rocks, among which she cowered and remained there moveless.

One thing at least was certain. Whistling Dan was not in the cave, for if he had been the child would have run to him for protection, or at least, cried out in her alarm. This information Haines whispered to Kate and she nodded, turning a white face toward him. Then she stepped out from the rock and went straight toward Joan.

There was no stir in the little figure. Even the wind seemed to take part in the secret and did not lift the golden hair. Once the eyes of the child glittered as they turned toward Kate, but otherwise she made no motion, like a rabbit which will not budge until the very shadow of the reaching hand falls over it.

So it was with Joan, and as Kate leaned silently over her she sprang to her feet and darted between the hands of her mother and away among the rocks. Past the reaching hands of Lee Haines she swerved, but it was only to run straight into the grip of Buck Daniels. Up to that moment she had not uttered a sound, but now she screamed out, twisted in his arms, and beat furiously against his face.

"Joan!" cried Kate. "Joan!"

She reached Buck and unwound his arms from the struggling body of the child.

"Honey, why are you afraid? Oh, my baby!"

For an instant Joan stood free, wavering, and her eyes held steadily upon her mother bright with nothing but fear and strangeness. Then something melted in her little round face, she sighed.

"Munner!" and stole a pace closer. A moment later Kate sat with Joan in her arms, rocking to and fro and weeping.

"What's happened?" gasped Haines to Daniels. "What's happened to the kid?"

"Don't talk," answered Buck, his face gray as that of Kate. "It's Dan's blood."

He drew a great breath.

"Did you see her try to—to bite me while I was holdin' her?"

Kate had started to her feet, holding Joan in one arm and dashing away her tears with the free hand. All her weakness was gone.

"Hurry!" she commanded. "We haven't any time to lose. Buck, come here! No, Lee, you're stronger. Honey, this is your Uncle Lee. He'll take care of you; he won't hurt you. Will you go to him?"

Joan shrank away while she examined him, but the instincts of a child move with thrice the speed of a mature person's judgment; she read the kindly honesty which breathed from every line of Haines's face, and held out her arms to him.

Then they started down the slope for the horses, running wildly, for the moment they turned their backs on the cave the same thought was in the mind of each, the same haunting fear of that small, shrill whistle pursuing. Half running, half sliding, they went down to the bottom of the gorge. While the pebble they started rushed after them in small avalanches, and they even had to dodge rocks of considerable size which came bounding after. Joan, alert upon the shoulder of Lee Haines, enjoyed every moment of it; her hair tossed in the sun, her arms were outstretched for balance. So they reached the horses, and climbed into the saddles. Then, without a word from one to the other, but with many a backward look, they started on the flight.

By the time they reached the shoulder of the hill on the farther side, with a long stretch of down slope before, they had placed a large handicap between them and the danger of pursuit, but still they were not at ease. On their trail, sooner or later, would come three powers working toward one end, the surety of Black Bart following a scent, the swiftness of Satan which never tired, and above all the rider who directed them both and kept them to their work. His was the arm which could strike from the distance and bring them down. They spurted down the hill.

No sooner were they in full motion than Joan, for the first time, seemed to realize what it was all about. She was still carried by Lee Haines, who cradled her easily in his powerful left arm, but now she began to struggle. Then she stiffened and screamed wildly. "Daddy Dan! Daddy Dan!"

"For God's sake, stop her mouth or he'll hear!" groaned Buck Daniels.

"He can't!" said Haines. "We're too far away even if he were at the cave now."

"I tell you he'll hear! Don't talk to me about distance."

Kate reined her horse beside Lee.

"Joan!" she commanded.

They were sweeping across the meadow now at an easy gallop. Joan screamed again, a wild plea for help.

"Joan!" repeated Kate, and her voice was fierce. She raised her quirt and shook it. "Be quiet, munner whip—hard!"

Another call died away on the lips of Joan. She looked at her mother with astonishment and then with a new respect.

"If you cry once more, munner whip!"

And Joan was silent, staring with wonder and defiance.

When they came near the cabin Haines drew rein, but Kate motioned him on.

"Where to?" he called.

"Back to the old ranch," she answered. "We've got to have help."

He nodded in grim understanding, and they headed on and down the slope toward the valley.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BILLY THE CLERK.

IF Sheriff Pete Glass had been the typical hard-riding, sure-shooting officer of the law as it is seen in the mountain desert, his work would have died with his death, but Glass had a mind as active as his hands, and therefore for at least a little while, his work went on after him. He had gathered fifteen practised fighters who represented, it might be said, the brute body of the law, and when they, with most of Rickett at their heels, burst down the door of the sheriff's office and found his body, they had only one thought, which was to swing into the saddle and ride on the trail of the killer, who was even now in a diminishing cloud of dust down the street.

He was riding almost due east, and the cry went up, "He's streakin' it for the Morgan Hills. Git after him, boys!" So into the saddle they went with a rush, fifteen tried men on fifteen chosen horses, and went down the street with a roar of hoof-

beats. That was the body and muscle of the sheriff's work going out to avenge him, but the mind of the law remained behind.

It was old Billy, the clerk. No one paid particular attention to Billy, and they never had. He was useless on a horse and ridiculous with a gun, and the only place where he seemed formidable was behind a typewriter. Now he sat looking down into the dead face of Pete Glass, trying to grasp the meaning of it all.

From the first he had been with Pete, from the first the invincibility of the little dusty man had been the chief article of Billy's creed, and now his dull eyes, bleared with thirty years of clerical labor, wandered around on the galaxy of dead men who looked down at him from the wall. He leaned over and took the hand of the sheriff as one would lean to help up a fallen man, but the fingers were already growing cold, and then Billy realized for the first time that this was death. Pete Glass had been; Pete Glass was not.

Next he knew that something had to be done, but what it was he could not tell, for he sat in the sheriff's office, and in that room he was accustomed to stop thinking and receive orders. He went back to his own little cubby-hole and sat down behind the typewriter; at once his mind cleared, thoughts came and linked themselves into ideas, pictures, plans.

The murderer must be taken, dead or alive, and those fifteen men had ridden out to do the necessary thing. They had seemed irresistible as they departed; indeed, no living thing they met could withstand them, human or otherwise, as Billy very well knew. Yet he recalled a saying of the sheriff, a thing he had insisted upon: "No man on no hoss will ever ride down Whistlin' Dan Barry. It's been tried before and it's never worked. I've looked up his history and it can't be done. If he's goin' to be run down it's got to be done with relays, like you was runnin' down a wild hoss." Billy rubbed his bald head and thought, and thought.

With that orderliness which had become his habit of mind, from work with reports and papers, sorting and filing away, Billy went back to the beginning. Dan Barry was fleeing. He started from Rickett, and nine chances out of ten he was heading, eventually, toward those practically impenetrable mountain ranges where the sheriff before had lost the trail after the escape from the cabin and the killing of Mat Henshaw. Toward this same region again he had retreated after the notorious killing at Alder. There was no doubt, then, humanly speaking, that he would make for the same safe refuge.

At first glance this seemed quite improbable, to be sure, for the Morgan Hills lay due east, or very nearly east, while the place from which Barry must have sallied forth and to which he would return, was somewhere well north of west, and a good forty miles away. It seemed strange that he should strike off in the opposite direction, so Billy closed his eyes, leaned back in his chair, and summoned up a picture of the country.

Five miles to the east the Morgan Hills rolled, sharply broken ups and downs of country—bad lands rather than real hills, and a difficult region to keep game in view. That very idea gave Billy his clue. Barry knew that he would be followed hard and fast, and he headed straight for the Morgans to throw the posse off the final direction he intended to take in his flight.

In spite of the matchless speed of that black stallion of which the sheriff had learned so much, he would probably let the posse keep within easy view of him until he was deep within the bad lands. Then he would double sharply around and strike out in the true direction of his flight.

Having reached this point in his deductions, Billy smote his hands together. He was trembling with excitement so that he filled his pipe with difficulty. By the time it was drawing well he was back examining his mental picture of the country.

West of Rickett, about the same distance as Morgan Hills, ran the Wago Mountains, low, rolling ranges which would hardly form an impediment for a horseman. Across these Barry might cut at a good speed on his western course, but some fifteen or twenty miles from Rickett he was bound to reach a most difficult barrier. It was the Asper River, at this season of the year

swollen high and swift with snow-water—a rare feat indeed if a man could swim his horse across such a stream. There were only two places in which it could be forded.

About fifty miles north and a little east of the line from Rickett the Asper spread out into a broad, shallow bed, its streams dispersed for several miles into a number of channels which united again, farther down the course, and made the same strong river. Toward this ford, therefore, it was possible that Dan Barry would head in the region of Caswell City.

There was, however, another way of crossing the stream. Almost due west of Rickett, a distance of fifteen miles, Tucker Creek joined the Asper. Above the point of junction both the creek and the river were readily fordable, and Barry could cross them and head straight for his goal.

It was true that to make Tucker Creek he would have to double out of the Morgan Hills and brush back perilously close to Rickett, but Billy was convinced that this was the outlaw's plan; for though the Caswell City fords would be his safest route it would take him a day's ride on an ordinary horse out of his way. Besides, the sheriff had always said: "Barry will play the chance!"

Billy would have ventured his life that the fugitive would strike straight for the creek as soon as he doubled out of Morgan Hills.

Doors began to bang; a hundred pairs of boots thudded and jingled toward Billy; the noise of voices rolled through the outer hall, poured through the door, burst upon his ears. He looked up in mild surprise; the first wave of Rickett's men had swept out of the court-house to take the trail of the fugitive or to watch the pursuit; in this second wave came the remnants, the old men, the women; great-eyed children.

In spite of their noise of foot and voice they appeared to be trying to walk stealthily, talk softly. They leaned about his desk and questioned him with gesticulations, but he only stared. They were all dim as dream people to Billy the clerk, whose mind was far away struggling with his problem.

"Pore old Billy is kind of dazed," suggested a woman. "Don't bother him, Bud. Look here!"

The tide of noise and faces broke on either side of the desk and swayed off toward the inner office, and vaguely Billy felt that they should not be there—the sheriff's privacy—the thought almost drew him back to complete consciousness, but he was borne off from them again on a wave of study—pictures. Off there to the east went the fifteen best men of the mountain desert on the trail of the slender fellow with the black hair and the soft brown eyes.

How he had seemed to shrink with aloofness, timidity, when he stood there at the door, giving his name. It was not modesty, Billy knew now; it was something akin to the beasts of prey, who shrink from the eyes of men until they are mad with hunger, and in the slender man Billy remembered the same shrinking, the same hunger. When he struck, no wonder that even the sheriff went down; no wonder if even the fifteen men were baffled on that trail; and therefore it was sufficiently insane for him, Billy the clerk, to sit in his office and dream with his ineffectual hands of stopping that resistless flight. Yet he pulled himself back to his problem.

Considering his problem in general the thing was perfectly simple: Barry was sure to head west, and to the west there were only two gates—fording the creek and the river above the junction in the first place, or in the second place cutting across the Asper far north at Caswell City.

If he could be turned from the direction of Tucker Creek he would head for the second possible crossing, and when he drew near Caswell City if he were turned by force of numbers again he would unquestionably skirt the Asper, hoping against hope that he might find a fordable place as he galloped south. But, going south, he might be fenced again from Tucker Creek, and then his case would be hopeless and his horse worn down.

It was a very clever plan, quite simple after it was once conceived, but in order to execute it properly it was necessary that the outlaw be pressed hard every inch of the way and never once allowed to get out of sight. He must be chased with relays.

In ordinary stretches of the mountain desert that would have been impossible, but the country around Rickett was not ordinary.

Between the Morgan Hills and Wago there were considerable stretches of excellent farm land, in the center of which little towns had grown up. Running north from the county seat they were St. Vincent, Wago, and Caswell City. Coming south again along the Asper River there was Ganton and Wilsonville, and just above the junction of the river with Tucker Creek lay the village of Bly Falls. There was no other spot in the mountain desert, perhaps, which could show so many communities. Also it was possible to get in touch with the towns from Rickett, for in a wild spirit of enterprise telephones had been strung to connect each village of the group.

His hand went out mechanically and pushed in an open drawer of his filing cabinet as if he were closing up the affair, putting away the details of the plan. Each point was now clear, orderly assembled. It meant simply chasing Barry along a course which covered close to a hundred miles and which lay in a loosely shaped U.

St. Vincent was the tip of the eastern side of that U. The fifteen men of St. Vincent were to be called out to turn the outlaw out of his course toward Tucker Creek, and then, as he struck northeast toward Caswell City, they were to furnish the posse with fifteen fresh horses, the best they could gather on such short notice.

Swinging north along that side of the U, Wago would next be warned to get its contribution of fifteen horses ready, and this fresh relay would send Barry thundering along toward Caswell City at full speed. Then Caswell City would send out its contingent of men and horses, and turn the fugitive back from the fords. By this time, unless his horse were better winded than any that Billy had ever dreamed of, it would be staggering at every stride, and the fresh horses from Caswell City would probably ride him down before he had gone five miles.

Even in case they failed in this, there was the little town of Ganton, which would be ready with its men and mounts. Perhaps they could hem in the desperado from the front and shoot him down there, as he skirted along the river. At the worst they would furnish the fresh horses and the fifteen hardy riders would spur at full speed south along the river. If again, by some miracle, the black stallion lasted out this run, Wilsonville lay due ahead, and that place would again give new horses to the chase.

Last of all, the men of Bly Falls could be warned. Bly Falls was a town of size, and it could turn out enough men to block a dozen Dan Barry's, no matter how desperate. If he reached that point, he must turn back. The following posse would catch him from the rear, and between two fires he must die ingloriously. Taking the plan as a whole it meant running Barry close to a hundred miles with six sets of horses.

It all hinged, however, on the first step: could the men of St. Vincent turn him out of his western course and send him north toward Caswell City? If they could, he was no better than a dead man. All things favored Billy. In the first place it was still morning, and eight hours of broad daylight would keep the fugitive in view every inch of the way. In the second place, much of the distance was cut up by the barb-wire fences of the farm lands, and he must either jump these or else stop to cut them.

A cackle of laughter cut in on Billy the clerk. They were laughing in that inner office, where the sheriff lay dead. Blood swept across his eyes, set his brain whirling, and he rushed to the door.

"You yelpin' coyotes!" shouted Billy the clerk. "Get out. I got to be alone! Get out, or by God—"

It was not so much his words, or the fear of this threats, but the very fact that Billy the clerk, harmless, smiling old Billy, had burst into noisy wrath, scared them as if an earthquake had gripped the building. They went out sidling, and left the rooms in quiet. Then Billy took up the phone.

"Pete Glass is dead," he was saying a moment later to the owner of the general merchandise store at St. Vincent. "Barry came in this morning and shot him. The boys have run him east to the Morgan Hills.

Johnny, listen hard and shut up. You got half an hour to turn out every man in your town. Ride south till you get in the hills on a bee-line east of where Tucker Creek runs into the old Asper. D'you hear? Then keep your eyes peeled to the east, and watch for a man on a black hoss ridin' hard, because Barry is sure as hell goin' to double back out of the Morgan Hills and come west like a scairt coyote. The posse will be behind him, but they most like be a hell of a ways to the bad. Johnny, everything hangs on you turnin' Barry back. And have fifteen fresh hosses, the best St. Vincent has, so that the boys in the posse can climb on 'em and ride hell-bent for Wago. Johnny, if we get him started north he's dead—and if you turn him like I say I'll see that you come in on the reward. D'ye hear?"

But there was only an inarticulate whoop from the other end of the wire.

Billy hung up. A little later he was talking to Wago.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MORGAN HILLS.

ONCE out of Rickett, Barry pulled the stallion back to an easy canter. He had camped during the latter part of the night near the town and ridden in in the morning, so that Satan was full of running. He rebelled now against this easy pace, and tossed his head with impatience. No curb restrained him, not even a bit; the light hackamore could not have held him for an instant, but the voice of the rider kept him in hand.

Now, out of Rickett's one street, came the thing for which Barry had waited, and delayed his course—a scudding dust cloud. On the top of a rise of ground he brought Satan to a halt and looked back, though Black Bart ran in a circle around him, and whined anxiously. Bart knew that they should be running; there was no good in that ragged dust cloud. Finally he sat down on his haunches and looked his master in the face, quivering with eagerness.

The posse came closer, at the rate of a racing horse, and near at hand the tufts of dust which tossed up above and behind the riders dissolved, and Whistling Dan made them out clearly, and more clearly.

For one form he looked above all, a big man who rode somewhat slanting; but Vic Gregg was not among the crowd, and for the rest, Barry had no wish to come within range of their harm. The revolver at his side, the rifle in the case, were for the seventh man who must die for Grey Molly. These who followed him mattered nothing —except that he must not come within their reach.

He studied them calmly as they swept nearer, fifteen chosen men, as he could tell by their riding, on fifteen choice horses, as he could tell by their gait. If they pushed him into a corner—well, five men were odds indeed, yet he would not have given them a thought; ten men made it a grim affair, but still he might have taken a chance; however, fifteen men made a battle suicide —he simply must not let them corner him.

Particularly fifteen such men as these, for in the mountain desert, where all men are raised gun in hand, these were the quickest and the surest marksmen. Each one of them had struck that elusive white ball in motion, and each had done it with a revolver. What could they do with a rifle?

That thought might have sent him rushing Satan down the farther slope, but instead he raised his head a little more and began to whistle softly to himself. Satan cocked an ear back to listen; Black Bart rose with a muffled growl. The posse rode in clear view, now, and at their head was a tall, lean man with the sun glinting now and again on his yellow mustache. He threw out his arm and the posse scattered toward the left. Obviously he was the accepted leader, and indeed few men in the mountain desert would not willingly have followed Mark Retherton. Another gesture from Retherton, and at once a dozen guns gleamed, and a dozen bullets whizzed perilously close to Barry, then the reports came barking up to him; he was just a little out of range.

Still he lingered for a moment before he turned Satan reluctantly, it seemed, and started him down the far slope, straight-

away for the Morgan Hills, as old Billy had prophesied. It would be no exercise canter even for Satan, for the horses which followed were rare of their kind, and the Western horse at the worst has manifold fine points.

His ancestor is the Barb or the Arab which the Spaniards brought with them to Mexico, and the descendants of that finest of equine bloods made up the mild herds which soon roamed the mountain desert to the north. Long famines of winter, hot deserts in summer, changed their appearance. Their heads grew lumpier, their necks more scraggy, their croups more slanting, their legs shorter; but their hoofs grew denser, hardier, their shorter coupling gave them greater weight-carrying possibilities, the stout bones and the clean lines of their legs meant speed, and above all they kept the stout heart of the thoroughbred, and they gained more than this, an indomitable, bull-dog persistence.

The cheapest Western cow-pony may look like the cartoon of a horse, but he has points which a judge will note, and he will run a picture horse to death in three days.

Such were the horses which took the trail of Satan, and they were chosen specimens of their kind. Up the slope they stormed and there went Satan skimming across the hollow beneath them. Their blood was his blood, their courage his courage, their endurance his endurance. The difference between them was the difference between the factory machine and the hand-made work of art. From his pasterns to his withers, from his hoofs to his croup every muscle was perfectly designed and perfectly placed for speed, tireless running; every bone was the maximum of lightness and strength combined. A feather bloom on a steady wind; such was the gait of Satan.

Down the hollow the posse thundered, and up the farther slope, and still the black slipped away from them until Mark Retherton cursed deeply to himself.

"Don't race your hosses, boys," he shouted. "Keep 'em in hand. That devil is playing with us."

As a result, they checked their mounts to merely a fast gallop, and Barry, looking back, laughed softly with understanding. Far different the laborious pounding of the posse and the light stretch of Satan beneath him. He leaned a little until he could catch the sound of the breathing, big, steady drafts with comfortable intervals between.

He could run like that all day, it seemed, and Whistling Dan ran his fingers luxuriously down the shining neck. Instantly the head tossed up, and a short whinny whipped back to him like a question. Just before them the Morgan Hills jutted up, like stiff mud chopped by the tread of giants.

"Now, partner," murmured Barry, "show 'em what you can do! Jest lengthen out a bit."

The steady breeze from the running sharpened into a gale, whisking about his face; there was no longer the wavelike rock of that swinging gallop, but a smooth, swift succession of impulses. Rocks, shrubs darted past him, and he felt a gradual settling of the horse beneath him as the strides lengthened. From behind a yell of dismay, and with a backward glance he say every man of the posse leaning forward and swinging his quirt. An instant later half a dozen of the ragged little hills closed between them.

Once fairly into the heart of the Morgans, he called the stallion back from the racing stride to a long canter, and from the gallop to a rapid trot, for in this broken country it was wearing on an animal to maintain a lope up hill and down the quick, jerking falls. The cow-puncher hates the trot, for his ponies are not built for it, but the deep play of Satan's fetlock joints broke the hard impacts; his gait now was hardly more jarring than the flow of the single-foot in an ordinary animal.

Black Bart, who had been running directly under the nose of the stallion, now skirted away in the lead. Here and there he twisted among the gulleys at a racing clip, his head high, and always he picked out the smoothest ground, the easiest rise, the gentlest descent which lay more or less straight in the line of his master's flight. It cut down the work of the stallion by half to have this swift, sure scout run before and point out the path, yet it was stiff labor

at the best, and Barry was glad when he came on the hard gravel of an old creek-bed cutting at right angles to his course.

From the first he had intended to run toward the Morgans only to cover the true direction of his flight, and now, since the posse was hopelessly left behind him, well out of hearing, he rode Satan into the middle of the creek-bed and swung him north.

It was bad going for a horse carrying a rider, and even the catlike certainty of Satan's tread could not avoid sharp edges here and there that might cut his hoofs. So Barry leaped to the ground and ran at full speed down the bed. Behind him Satan followed, his ears pricked uneasily, and Black Bart, at a signal from the master, dropped back and remained at the first bend of the old, empty stream. In a moment they wound out of sight even of Bart, but Barry kept steadily on. It would take a magnifying-glass to read his trail over those rocks.

He had covered a mile, perhaps, when Bart came scurrying again and leaped joyously around the master.

"They've hit the creek, eh?" said Whistling Dan. "Well, they'll mill around a while, and like as not they'll run a course south to pick me up agin."

He gestured toward the side, and as soon as Satan stood on the good going once more, Barry swung again into the saddle and headed straight back west. No doubt the posse would ride up and down the creek-bed until they found his trail turning back, but they would lose precious minutes picking it up, and in the mean time he would be far, far away toward the ford of Tucker Creek.

Then, clearly, but not any louder than the snapping of a dry twig near his ear, he heard the report of a revolver and it spoke to him of many things as the baffled posse rode up and down the creek-bed hunting for the direction of his escaps. Some one had fired that shot to relieve his anger.

He neither spoke to Satan nor struck him, but there was a slight leaning forward, an imperceptible flexing of the leg muscles, and in response the black sprang again into the swift trot which sent him gliding over the ground, and twisting back and forth among the sharp-sided gullies with a movement as smooth as the run of the wolf-dog, which once again raced ahead.

When they came out in view of the rolling plain, Barry stopped again and glanced to the west and the north, while Black Bart ran to the top of the nearest hill and looked back, an ever vigilant outpost. To the north lap the fordable streams near Caswell City, and that way was perfect safety, it seemed. Not perfect, perhaps, for Barry knew nothing of the telephones by which the little bald-headed clerk at the sheriff's office was rousing the countryside; but if he struck toward Caswell City from the Morgans, there was not a chance in ten that scouts would catch him at the river, which was fordable for mile after mile.

That way, then, lay the easiest escape; but it mean a long detour out of the shortest course, which struck almost exactly west, skirting dangerously close to Rickett. But, as Billy had presupposed, it was the very danger which lured the fugitive. Behind him, entangled in the gullies of the badlands, were the fifteen best men of the mountain desert. In front of him lay nothing except the mind of Billy the clerk. But how could he know that?

Once again he swayed a little forward, and this time the stallion swung at once into his ranging gallop, then verged into a half-racing gait, for Barry wished to get out of sight among the rolling ground before the posse came out from the Morgan Hills on his back trail.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE TRAP.

HE had already covered a good ten miles, and a large part of that through extremely rough going, but the black ran with his head as high as the moment he pulled out of Rickett that morning, and there was only enough sweat to make his slender neck and greyhound flanks flash in the sun.

Back he winged toward Rickett, running as freely as the wild leader of a herd, sometimes turning his fine head to one side to look back at the master or gaze over the

hills, sometimes slackening to a trot up a sharper ascent or lengthening into a fuller gallop on an easy down-slope. There seemed no purpose in the reins which were kept just taut enough to give the rider the feel of his mount, and the left hand which held them was never still for a moment, but played back and forth slightly with the motion of the head. Except in times of crisis those reins were not for the transmission of orders, it seemed, but they served as the wires through which the mind of the man and the mind of the horse kept in telegraphic touch.

In the mean time Black Bart loafed behind, lingering on the crest of each rise to look back, and then racing to catch up, but half-way back to Rickett he came up beside the master, whining, and leaping as high as Barry's knee.

"You seen somethin', Bart?" whispered Barry. "Are they comin' on the trail again?"

He swayed a bit to one side and diverted Satan out of his course so as to climb one of the more commanding swells. From this point he glanced back and saw a dust cloud, much like that which a small whirlwind picks up, rolling down the nearest slope of the Morgan Hills. At that distance the posse looked hardly larger than one unit, and certainly they could not see the single horseman they followed; however, they could follow the trail easily across this ground. Satan had turned to look back.

"Shall we go back and play around 'em, boy?" asked Barry.

Black Bart had run on ahead, and now he turned with a short howl.

"The partner says 'no,'" continued the master. "Of all the dogs I ever see, Bart plays the most careful game; but out on the trail, Satan"—here he sent the stallion into the sweeping lope—"Bart knows more 'n you an' me put together, so we'll do what he says."

For answer Satan lengthened a little into his stride. As for the wolf-dog, he went off like a black bolt into the eye of the wind, streaking it west to hunt out the easiest course. A wolf—and surely there was more of wolf than of dog in Black Bart—has a finer sense for the lay of ground than anything on four feet.

He knows how to come down the wind on his quarry, keeping to the depressions and ravines so that not a taint of his presence is blown to the prey; and he will skulk across an open plain, stealing from hollow to hollow and stalking from bush to bush, so that the wariest are taken by surprise. As for Black Bart, he knew the kind of going which the stallion liked as well, almost, as he knew his own preferences, and he picked out a course which a surveyor with line and spirit-level could hardly have bettered. He wove across the country in loosely thrown semicircles, and came back in view of the master at the proper point.

There was hardly much point in such industry in a country as smooth as this, not much more difference, say, than the saving of distance which the horse makes who hugs the fence on the turn, and on account of that sticks his head under the finish wire a nose in front; and Bart clung to his work with scrupulous care.

Sometimes he ran back with lolling, red tongue, when the course lay clear even to the duller sense of a human, and frisked under the nose of Satan until a word from Barry sent him scurrying away like a pleased child. His duties comprehended not only the selection of the course, but also an eagle vigilance before and behind, so that when he came again with a peculiar whine, Barry leaned a little from the saddle and spoke to him anxiously.

"D'you mean to say that they been gainin' ground on us, old boy?"

Black Bart leaped sidewise, keeping his head toward the master, and he howled in troubled fashion.

"Whereaway are they now?" muttered Barry, and looked back again.

A great distance behind, hardly distinguishable now, the dust of the posse was blending into the landscape and losing itself against a gray background.

"If they's nothin' wrong behind, what's bitin' you, Bart. You gettin' hungry, maybe? Want to hurry home?"

Another howl, still louder, answered him.

"Go on, then, and show me where they's trouble."

Black Bart whirled and darted off almost straight ahead, but bearing up a hill slightly south of their course. Toward the top of this eminence he changed his lope for a skulking trot that brought his belly fur trailing on the ground.

"They's somethin' *ahead* of us, Satan!" cried the master softly. "What could that be? It's men, by the way Bart sneaks up to look at 'em. They'se nothin' else that he'd do that way for. Easy, boy, and go soft!"

The stallion cut his gallop into a slinking trot, his head lowered, even his ears flat back, and glided up the hillside. Barry swung to the ground and crawled to the top of the hill. What he saw was a dozen mounted men swinging down into the low, broad scoop of ground beyond the hill. They raced with their hat-brims standing stiff up in the wind.

"They've been watchin' us with glasses!" was the exclamation of Dan to Bart, and the wolf-dog snarled savagely, his neck-fur ruffing up.

The dozen directly in front were not all, for to the right, bearing straight across his original course, came another group almost as strong, and to the left eight more riders spurred at top speed.

"We almost walked into 'em," said Barry; "but they ain't got us yet. Back, boy!"

The wolf-dog slunk down the hill until it was out of sight from the farther side of the slope, and the master imitated these tactics until he was close to Satan. Once in the saddle he made up his mind quickly. Some one in Rickett had guessed his intention to double back toward Tucker Creek, and they had cut him off cleverly enough and in overwhelming force. However, no one in Rickett could guess that another way out remained for him in the fords below Caswell City, and even if they knew, their knowledge would do them no good. They could not wing a message to that place to head him off; it was not humanly possible. For Dan know nothing of the telephone lines which brought Caswell City itself within speaking distance of far-away Rickett.

Caswell City, then, was his goal, but to get toward it he must circle far back toward the Morgan Hills; back almost into the teeth of the posse in order to skirt around the right wing of these new enemies. Even then, to double that flank, he must send Satan ahead at full speed. As he swung around, the eight men of that end party crashed over the hill five hundred yards away, and their yell at the view of the quarry went echoing up the shallow valley.

The slayer of Pete Glass, he who had done the notorious killing at Alder, was almost in touch of their revolvers—and their horses were fresh. Not one of that eight but would have given odds on his chances of sharing the capture money. There were no spurs on the heels of Barry to urge Satan, and no quirt in his hand, but a single word sent the black streaking down the hill.

Going into the Morgan Hills he had gone like the wind, but now he rushed like a thoroughbred standing a challenge in the homestretch. His nose and his flying tail were a straight line, and the flash of his legs was a tangle which no eye could follow as he shot east on the back trail, straight toward the posse. For a mile or more that speed did not slacken, and at the end of that distance he began to move by degrees to the right.

The men behind him knew well enough what the plan of the fugitive was, and they angled farther toward the north; there, in the distance, came the posse, the cloud of dust breaking up now into the dark figures of the fifteen, and if the men from St. Vincent could hold the pace a little longer they would drive Barry between two fires. They flattened themselves along their horses' necks at infinite risk to their necks in case of a stumble, and every spur in the crowd was dripping red; horseflesh could do no more, and still the black drew ahead inches and inches with every stride.

If they could not turn him with their speed another way remained, and by swift agreement the four best horses were sent ahead at full speed while the other riders caught their reins over the pommels and jerked out their rifles; a quartet of bullets went screaming after the black horse.

Indeed, there was little enough chance that a placed shot would go home; but their magazines were full, and a chance hit would do the work and kill both man and horse at that rate of speed. Dan Barry knew it, and when the bullets sang he whirled in the saddle and swept out his rifle from its case in the same movement.

That yellow devil of anger flared in his eyes as he pitched the butt to his shoulder and straight into the circle of the sight rode Johnny Gasney of St. Vincent. Another volley whistled about him, and his finger trembled on the trigger. No chance work with Barry, for he knew the gait of Satan as a practised naval gunner knows the swing of his ship in a smooth sea, and that circle of doom wavered over Johnny Gasney for a dozen strides before Dan turned with a faint moan and jammed the rifle back in its case.

In another moment he was balancing in his stirrups, leaning close to cut the wind with his shoulders.

"I can't do it, Satan. I got nothin' ag'in' them. They think they're playin' square. I can't do it. Stretch out, old boy. Stretch out!"

It seemed impossible that the stallion could increase his exertions, but with that low voice at his ear he did literally stretch along the ground and jerked himself away from the pursuit like a tall ship when a new sail spreads in a gale.

The men from St. Vincent saw that the game was lost. Every one of the eight had his rifle at the shoulder, and the bullets hissed everywhere about him. Right into his face, but a greater distance away, rode the posse from Rickett, the fifteen tried men and true; and having caught the scheme of the trap they were killing their horses with a last effort.

It failed through no fault of theirs. Just as the jaws of the trap were about to close, the black stallion whisked out from danger, lunged over a swell of ground, and was out of view. When they reached that point, yelling, Barry raced his black out of range of all except the wildest chance shot. The eight from St. Vincent drove their weapons sullenly into the holsters; for the last five minutes they had been silently dividing ten thousand dollars by eight, and the awakening left a taste of ashes.

They could only follow him now at a moderate pace, in the hope of wearing him down, and since a slight pause made little difference in the result—it would even be an advantage to breathe their horses after that burst—they drew rein and cursed in chorus.

CHAPTER XXXII.

RELAYS.

THE horses from St. Vincent already wheezed from the run, but the mounts of the posse were staggering—completely blown. Ever since they left Rickett they had been going at close to top speed, and the last rush finished them; at least seven of that chosen fifteen would never be worth their salt again, and they stood with hanging heads, bloody foam upon their breasts, and dripping from their mouths, their sides laboring, and breathing with that rattle which the rider dreads. The posse, to a man, swung sullenly to the ground.

"Who's boss, boys?" called Johnny Gasney, puffing in his saddle as he rode up. "By God, we'll get him yet! They's a devil in that black hoss! Who's boss?" he repeated.

"I ain't exactly boss," answered Mark Retherton, whom not even fear of death could hurry in his ways of speech, "but maybe I can talk for the boys. What you want, Johnny?"

"You gents 'll be needin' new hosses?"

"We'll be needin' graves for the ones we got," growled Mark, and he stared gloomily at the dull eye of his pinto. "The best cuttin' out hoss I ever throwed a leg over, and now—look at him!"

"Here's your relay!" cut in Johnny Gasney. "Old Billy phoned down." Five men came leading three spare horses apiece. "He phoned down and asked me to get fifteen hosses ready. He must of guessed where Barry would head. And here they are—the best ponies in St. Vincent—but for God's sake use 'em better 'n you did that set!"

The other members of the posse set to

work silently changing their saddles to the new relay, and Mark Retherton tossed his answer over his shoulder to Johnny Gasney while he drew the cinch of his mount brutally tight.

"They's a pile of hoss-flesh in these parts, but they ain't more 'n one Barry. You gents can say good-by to your hosses, unless we nail him before they're run down."

Johnny Gasney rubbed his red, fat forehead, perplexed.

"It's all right," he decided, "because it ain't possible the black hoss can outlast these. But—he sure seemed full of runnin'! One thing more, Mark. You don't need to fear pressin' Barry, because he won't shoot. He had his gun out, but I guess he don't want to run up his score any higher 'n it is. He put it back without firin' a shot. Go on, boys, and go like hell. Billy has lined up a new relay for you at Wago."

They made no pause to start in a group, but each sent home the spurs as soon as he was in the saddle. They had ridden for the blood of Pete Glass before, but now at least seven of them rode for the sake of the horses they had ruined, and to a cowpuncher a favorite mount is as dear as a friend.

They expected to find the black out of sight, but it was a welcome surprise to see him not half a mile away, wading across St. Vincent Creek; for Barry quite accurately guessed that there would be a pause in the pursuit after that hair-breadth escape, and at the creek he stopped to let Satan get his wind. He would not trust the stallion to drink, but gave him a bare mouthful from his hat and loosened the cinches for an instant.

Not that this was absolutely necessary, for Satan was neither blown nor leg-weary. He stood dripping with sweat, indeed, but poised lightly, his head high, his ears pricked, his nostrils distended to transparency as he drew in great breaths. Even that interval Barry used, for he set to work vigorously massaging the muscles of shoulders and hips and whipping off the sweat from neck and flank. It was several moments, and already Satan's breath came easily, when Black Bart shot down from his watch-post and warned them on with a snarl; but still, before he tightened the cinches again, and climbed to the saddle, Barry took the fine head of the stallion between his hands.

"Between you and me, Satan," he murmured, "our day's work is jest beginnin'. Are you feelin' fit?"

Satan nuzzled the shoulder of the master and snorted his answer; Black Bart had given the warning, and the stallion was eager to be off.

They crossed the creek at a place where the stones came almost to the surface, since nothing is more detrimental to the speed of a horse than a plunge in cold water, and with the hoofbeats of the posse growing up behind they cantered off again a little east of north, straight for Caswell City.

There was little work for Black Bart in such country as this, for there was rarely a rise of ground over which a man on horseback could not look, and the surface was race-track fast. Once Satan knew the direction there was nothing for it but to sit the saddle and let him work, and he fell into his long-distance gait.

It was a smart pace for any ordinary animal to follow through half a day's journey, and Barry knew with perfect certainty that there was not the slightest chance of even the fresh horses behind him wearing down Satan before night; but to his astonishment the trailers rode as if they had limitless horseflesh at their command. Perhaps the members of the posse were unaware of the running that was still in Satan, so Barry sent the stallion on at a free gallop that shunted the sagebrush past him in a dizzy whirl.

A mile of this, but when he looked back the posse were even closer. They were riding still with the spur! It was madness, but it was not his part to worry for them, and it was necessary that he maintain at least this interval, so he leaned a little forward to cut the wind more easily, and Satan leaped into a faster pace. He had several distinct advantages over the mounts of the posse. At their customary rolling lope they will travel all day with hardly a break, but they have neither the size nor

the length of leg for sustained bursts of speed.

Moreover, most of the cow-ponies who now raced on the trail of Satan carried riders who outweighed Barry by twenty pounds, and in addition to this they were burdened by saddles made ponderously to stand the strain of roping cattle, whereas Barry's specially made saddle was hardly half that weight. Perhaps more than all this, the cow-ponies rode by compulsion, urged with sharp spurs, checked and guided by the jaw-breaking curb, whereas Satan frolicked along at his own will, or at least at the will of a master which was one with his.

No heavy bit worried his mouth, no pointed steel tormented his flanks. He had only one handicap—the weight of his rider, and that weight was balanced and distributed with the care of a thoroughly skilled horseman.

With all this in mind it was hardly wonderful that the stallion kept the posse easily in play. His breathing was a trifle harder, now, and perhaps there was not quite the same light spring in his gallop; but Barry, looking back, could tell by the tossing heads of the horses which followed that they were being quickly run down to the last gasp. Mile after mile there was not a pause in that murderous pace, and then, cutting the sky with a row of sharply pointed roofs, he saw a town straight ahead and groaned in understanding.

It was rather new country to Barry, but the posse must know it like a book. They were spending their horses freely, because they hoped to arrange for a fresh series of mounts in Wago. However, it would take some time for them to arrange the details of the loan, and by that time he would be out of sight among the hills which stretched ahead. That would give him a sufficient start, and he would make the fords near Caswell City comfortably ahead. At Caswell City, indeed, they might get still another relay; but just beyond the Asper River rose the Grizzly Peaks — his own country, and once among them he could laugh the posse to scorn.

He patted Satan on the shoulder and swept on at redoubled speed, skirting close to the town, while the posse plunged straight into it.

Listening closely, he could hear their shouts as they entered the village; could mark the cessation of their hoofbeats.

Ten minutes, five minutes at least for the change of horses, and that time would put him safely among the hills.

But the impossible happened. There was no pause of minutes, hardly a pause of seconds, when the rush of hoofbeats began again and poured out from the town, fifteen desperate riders on fifteen fresh mounts. By some miracle Wago had been warned, and the needed horses had been kept there saddled and ready for the relay.

It turned an easy escape into a close chance, but still his faith in Satan was boundless to reach the fords in time and the safety of the mountains beyond. Another word, and with a snort the great-hearted stallion swept up the slope, with Black Bart at his old work, skirting ahead and choosing the easiest way. That was another great handicap in favor of the fugitive, and every advantage counted with redoubled significance now, every foot of distance saved, every inch of climb avoided.

A new obstacle confronted him, for the low, rolling hills were everywhere checkered with squares and oblongs of ploughed ground, freshly turned, and guarded by tall fences of barbed-wire. They could be jumped, but jumping was no easy matter for a tiring horse, and Barry saw, with a sigh of relief, a sharp gulch to the left which cut straight through that region of broken farms and headed north and east, pointing like an arrow in the direction of the fords. He swung down into it without a thought and pressed on. The bottom was gravelly, here and there, from the effect of the waters which had once washed through the ravine and cut these sides so straight; but over the greater part of the bottom sand had drifted, and the going was hardly worse than the hilly stretches above.

The sides grew higher, now, with great rapidity. Already they were up to the shoulder of Satan, now up to his withers, and from behind the roar of the posse racing at full speed, filled the gulch with confusion of echoes. They must be racing

their horses as if they were entering the home stretch, as if they were sure of the goal. It was strange.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE JUMP.

HE brought Satan back to a hand canter, and so he pulled around the next curve of the gulch and saw the trap squarely in front. He came to a full halt. For he saw a tall, strong barbed-wire fence stretching across the stream-bed, and beyond the fence were a litter of chicken-coops, iron bands from broken barrels, and a thousand other of those things which brand the typical Western farm-yard; above the top of the bank, to his left, he caught a glimpse of the sharp roof of the house.

He looked back, but it was far too late to turn, ride down the ravine to a place where the bank could be scaled, and cut across country once more. The posse came like a whirlwind, yelling, shooting as if they hoped to attract attention, and attention they certainly won, for now Dan saw a tall, middle-aged fellow, his long beard blowing over one shoulder as he ran, come down into the farm-yard with a double-barreled shotgun in his hands.

He was a type of those who do not know what it is to miss their target—probably because ammunition comes so high; and with a double load of buckshot it was literally death to come within his range. Dan knew that a great many chances may be taken against a revolver, and even a rifle can be tricked, but it is suicide to flirt with a shotgun in the hands of one used to bring down doves as they sloped out of the air toward a water-hole.

The farmer stood with his broad-brimmed straw hat pushed far back on his head, looking up and down the ravine, a perfect target—and Barry's hand slipped automatically over to his rifle.

His fingers refused to close upon it.

"I can't do it, Satan," he whispered. "We got to take our chances of gettin' by, that's all. *He* didn't have no hand with Grey Molly."

Narrow chances indeed, by this time, for the brief pause had brought the posse fairly upon his heels; the farmer saw the fugitive and brought his shotgun to the ready; and Black Bart in an agony of impatience raced round and round the master. A wild cheer rose from the posse and came echoing about him; they had sighted their quarry. From Rickett to Morgan Hills, from Morgan Hills to St. Vincent, from St. Vincent to Wago and far beyond; but this was the end of an historic run.

"D'ye see?" whispered Barry, leaning close to Satan's ears. "Lad, d'ye see what you've got to do?"

The black stood with his head very high, quivering through his whole body while he eyed the fence. It was murderously high, and all things were against him, the long run, the rise of the ground going toward the fence, and the gravel from which he must take off for the jump.

"You can do it," said the master. "You *got* to do it! Go for it, boy. We win or lose together!"

He swayed forward, and Satan leaped ahead at full speed, gathering impetus, scattering the gravel on either side. The farmer on the inside of the fence raised his shotgun leisurely to his shoulder and took a careful aim. He knew what it all meant. He had heard of the outlaw, Barry, with his black horse and his wolf-dog — every one in the desert had, for that matter—and even had he been ignorant, the shouting of the posse which now raced down the cañon in full view would have told him all that he needed to know.

How many things went through his mind while he squinted down the gleaming barrel! He thought of the long labor on the farm and the mortgage which still ate the life of his produce every year; he thought of the narrow bowed shoulders of his wife; he thought of the meager faces of his children; and he thought first and last of ten thousand dollars reward! No wonder the hand which supported the barrels was steady as an iron prop. He was shooting for his life and the happiness of five souls!

He would save his fire till he literally saw the white of the enemy's eyes; until the outlaw reached the fence. No horse on the

mountain desert could top that highest strand of wire as he very well knew; and in his youth, back in Kentucky, he had ridden hunters. That fence came exactly to the top of his head, and the top of his head, and the top of his head was six feet and two inches from the ground. To make assurance doubly sure he dropped upon one knee and made that shotgun an unstirring part and portion of himself.

Nobly, nobly the black came on, his ears pricking as he judged the great task, and his head carried a little high and back as any good jumper knows his head must be carried.

The practised eye of the farmer watched the outlaw gather his horse under him. Well he knew the meaning of that shortening grip on the reins to give the horse the last little lift that might mean success or failure in the jump. Well he knew that rise in the stirrups, that leaning forward, and his heart rose in unison and went back to the blue grass of Kentucky glittering in the sun.

Before them went the wolf-dog, skimming low, reached the fence, and shot over it in a graceful, high-arched curve.

Then the shout of the rider: "Up! *Up!*"

And the stallion reared and leaped. He seemed to graze it coming up, so close was his take-off; he seemed to be pawing his way over with the forefeet; and then with both legs doubled close, hugging his body, he shot across and left the highest strand of the wire quivering and humming.

The farmer hurled his best shotgun a dozen yards away and threw up his hat.

"Go it, lad! God bless ye; and good luck!"

The hand of the rider lifted in mute acknowledgment, and as he shot past the farmer caught a glimpse of a delicately handsome face that smiled down at him.

"The left gate! The left gate!" he shouted through his cupped hands, and as the fugitive rushed through the upper gate he turned to face the posse, which was already pulling up at the fence and drawing their wire-cutters.

As Barry shot out onto the higher ground on the other side of the farmhouse he could see them severing the wires, and the interruption of the chase would be only a matter of seconds. But seconds counted triply, now, and the halt and the time they would spend getting up impetus all told in favor of the fugitive.

Thirty-five miles or thereabout, since they left Rickett that morning, and still the black ran smoothly, with a lilt to his gallop. Dan Barry lifted his head and his whistling soared and pulsed and filled the air. It made Bart come back to him; it made Satan toss his head and glance at the master from the corner of his bright eye, for this was an assurance that the battle was over and thet rest not far away.

On they drove, straight as a bird flies for Caswell City, and Black Bart, ranging ahead among the hills, was picking the way once more. If the stallion were tired, he gave no sign of it. The sweep of his stride brushed him past rocks and shrubs, and he literally flowed up-hill and down, far different from the horses which scampered in his rear, for they pounded the earth with their efforts, grunting under the weight of fifty-pound saddles and heavy riders.

Another handicap checked them, for while Satan ran on alone, freely, the bunched pursuers kept a continual friction back and forth. The leaders reined in to keep back with the mass of the posse, and those in the rear by dint of hard spurring would rush up to the front in turn until some spirited nag challenged for the lead, so that there was a steady interplay among the fifteen. Their gait at the best could not be more than the pace of their slowest member, but even that pace was diminished by the difficulties of group riding.

Yet Mark Retherton refused to allow his men to scatter and stretch out. He kept them in hand steadily, a bunched unit ready to strike together, for he had seen the dead body of Pete Glass and he kept in mind a picture of what might happen if this fellow should whirl and pick off the posse man by man. Better prolong the run, for in the end no single horse could stand up against so many relays. Yet it was maddening to watch the stallion float over hill and dale with that same unbroken stride.

Once and again he sent the fresh horses from Wago after the fugitive in a sprinting

burst, but each time the black drifted farther away, and mile after mile Mark Retherton pulled his field-glasses to his eyes and strained his vision to make out some sign of labor in the gait of Satan. There was no change. His head was still high, the rhythm of his lope unfaltering.

But here the Wago Mountains—not more than ragged hills, to be sure — cut across the path of the outlaw, and in those hills, unless the message which waited for him at Wago had been false, should be the men of Caswell City, two score or more besides the fifteen fresh horses for the posse. Two score of men, at least, Caswell could send out, and from the heights they could surely detect the coming of Barry and plant themselves in his way. An ambush, a volley, would end this famous ride.

The hills came up on them swiftly, now, and if the men of Caswell failed in their duty it meant safety for the fugitive, because two miles beyond were the willows of the marshes and the fords across the Asper River. There could only be two alternatives, since not a man showed on the hills. Either they waited in ambush, or else they had mistaken the route along which Barry would come, and the latter was hardly possible.

With his glasses Mark Retherton scanned the hills anxiously, and it was then that he saw the dark form of the wolf-dog skulking on before the outlaw. He had watched Black Bart before this, of course, but never with suspicion until he noted the peculiar manner in which the animal skirted here and there through the rough ground, pausing on high places, weaving back and forth across the course of his master.

"Like a scout," thought Retherton. "And by God, there he comes to report!"

For Black Bart had whirled and raced straight back for Dan. There was no need of howl or whine to give the reason of his coming; the speed of his running meant business, and Barry shortened the pace of Satan while he looked over the hills, incredulous, despairing. It could not be that men lurked there to cut him off. No living thing could have raced from Rickett to Caswell City to warn them of his coming. Nevertheless, there came Bart with the ill-tidings, and it only remained to skirt swiftly east, round the dangerous ground, and strike the marshes first. He swung Satan around on the new course with a pressure of his knees and loosed him into a freer gallop.

They must have sensed the meaning of this maneuver at once, for hardly had he stretched out east when voices shouted out of the hills, and around and over several low knolls came forty horsemen, racing. Half a dozen were already due east—no escape that way; and the long line of the others came straight at him with the slope of the ground to give them velocity.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE WARNING.

ALL in a grim instant he saw the trap. It closed upon his consciousness with a click, and as he doubled Satan around he knew that the only escape was in running southeast along the banks of the Asper. Even that was a desperate, a forlorn chance, for if that omnipotent voice could reach from Rickett to Caswell City, fifty miles away, certainly it must have warned the river towns of Ganton and Wilsonville and Bly Falls where Tucker Creek ran into the Asper.

But this was no time for thinking. Already, looking back, he saw the posse changing their saddles to fifteen fresh mounts, and he headed Satan across the Wago Hills, west and south.

It was hot work. Even the steel-wire muscles of Black Bart were weakening under the tremendous labors of that day, and as he scouted ahead his head was low and his red tongue lolled, and surest sign of all, the bushy tail drooped; yet it was time to make a new call upon both wolf-dog and horse, for the posse was racing after him as before, giving even the fresh, willing mounts the urge of spurs and quirts. He ran his hand down the dripping neck and shoulder of Satan; he called to him; and with a snort the stallion responded. He felt the quiver as the muscles tightened for the work; he felt the settling as Satan lengthened to racing speed.

Through the Wago Hills, then, with Bart picking the way as before, and never a falter in the sweep of Satan's running. If his head was a little lower, if his ears lay flat, only the master knew the meaning, and still, when he spoke, the glistening ears pricked up, and they bounded on to a greater speed than before.

The flight of a gull on unstirring wings when the wind bouys it, the glide of water over the descent of smooth rock, with never a ripple, like all things effortless, swift, and free, such was the gait of Satan as he fled. Let them spur the fresh horses from Caswell City till their flanks dripped red, they would never gain on him.

On through the hills, and now the heave of his great breaths told of the strain, down like an arrow into the rolling ground, and now they galloped beside the Asper banks. The master looked darkly upon that water.

Ten days before, when the snows had not yet reached the climax of melting, ten days later when that climax was overpassed, the Asper would have been fordable, but now a brown flood stormed along the gully, ate away the banks, undermined the willows here and there, and rolled stones larger than a man could lift. It went with an angry shouting as if it defied the fugitive. It was narrow, maddeningly narrow, almost small enough to tempt a leap across to the safety of the thickets on the farther side, but the force of the water alone was enough to warn the bravest swimmer away, and here and there, like teeth in the mouth of the shark, jagged stones cut the surface with white foam streaking out below them; as if to prove its power, even while Dan turned south along the bank, a dead trunk shot down the stream and split on one of the Asper's teeth.

Even then he felt the temptation. There lay the forest on the farther side, a forest which would shelter him, and above the forest, hardly a mile back, began the Grizzly Peaks. They lunged straight up to snowy summits, and all along their sides blue shadows of the afternoon drifted through a network of ravines—a promise of peace, a surety of safety if he could reach that labyrinth.

He was almost glad when he left the mockery of the river's noise to turn aside for Ganton. There it lay in a bend of the Asper in the low-lands, and every town where men lived was an enemy. He could see them now gathered just outside the village, twenty men, perhaps, and fifteen spare horses, the best they had, for the posse.

On past Ganton, and again a call upon Satan to meet the first spurt of the posse on its new horses. There was something in the stallion to answer, some incredible reserve of nerve strength and courage. There was a slight labor, now, and something of the same heave and pitch which comes in the gait of a common horse; also, when he put Satan up the first slope beyond Ganton he noted a faltering, a deeper lowering of the head. When his hoofs struck a loose rock he no longer had the easy recoil of the morning. He staggered like a graceful yacht chopped by a cross-current.

Now down the slope, now back to the roar of the Asper once more, for there the going was most level, but always the strides were shortening, shortening, and the head of the stallion nodded at his work.

All that was seen by Mark Retherton through his glasses, though they were almost close enough now to see details through the naked eye. He turned in the saddle to the posse, grim faces, sweat and dust clotted in their mustaches, their faces drawn and gray with streaks over the nose and under the eyes where perspiration ran.

They rode crookedly now, for seventy miles at full speed had racked them, twisted them, cramped their muscles. Scotty kept his head tilted far back, for his spinal column seemed about to snap. Walsh leaned to his right side which a tormenting pain drew at every stride, and Hendricks cursed in gasps through a wry mouth.

It had been an hour since Mark Retherton last spoke, and when he attempted it now his voice was as hoarse as a croaking frog.

"Boys, buck up! He's done! D'ye see the black laborin'? D'ye see it? Hey, Lew, Garry, we've got the best hosses among us three. Now's the time for a spurt, and by God, we'll run him down. I'm startin'!"

He made his word good with an Indian

yell and a wave of his hat that sent his buckskin leaping straight into the air, to land with stiff legs, "swallowing its head," but then it straightened out in earnest. That buckskin had a name from Bly Falls to Caswell City for speed and courage, and it lived up to the record in this time of need. Close behind it came Lew and Garry on ponies scarcely slower than the buckskin, and they closed rapidly on Satan.

The plan of Retherton was plain. Now that the black was running on its nerve a spurt might bring them within striking distance, and if they could check the flight for an instant by opening advance guard fire, they might drive the fugitive into a corner by the river and hold him there until the main body of the posse came up. The three of them running alone in the lead could do five yards for every four of the slower horses, and the effect showed at once.

Going up a slope the trot of the stallion maintained or even increased his lead; but when they reached the easier ground beyond they drew rapidly upon him. They saw Barry bend low; they saw the stallion increase its pace.

"By God!" shouted Retherton in involuntary admiration, "I'd rather have that hoss than the ten thousand. But feed 'em the spurs, boys, and he'll come back to us inside a mile."

And Retherton was right. Before that mile was out the black slipped back inch by inch, until at length Retherton called: "Now grab your guns, partners, and see if you can salt him down with lead. Give your hosses their heads and turn loose!"

They pulled their guns to their shoulders and sent a volley at the outlaw. One bullet clipped a spark from the rocks just behind the stallion's feet; the other two must have gone wide. Once more Barry flinched closer over the neck of Satan, and once again the horse answered with a fresh burst of speed, but in a few moments he came back to them. Flesh could not stand that pace after seventy-five miles of running.

They saw the rider straighten and look back; then the sun flashed on his rifle.

"Feed 'em the spur!" shouted Retherton. "If we can't hit him shooting ahead, he ain't got a chance to hit us shootin' backward." For it is notoriously hard to turn in the saddle and accomplish anything with a rifle. One is moving away from the target instead of toward it, and every condition of ordinary shooting is reversed; above all, the moment a man turns his head he is completely out of touch with his horse. Apparently the fugitive knew this, and made no attempt to place his shots. He merely jerked his gun to the shoulder and blazed away as soon as it was in place; half a dozen yards in front of Retherton the bullet kicked up the dust.

"I told you," he shouted. "He can't do nothin' that way. Close in for God's sake!"

He himself was flailing with his quirt, and the buckskin grunted at every stride. Once more the rifle pitched to the outlaw's shoulder, and this time the bullet clicked on a rock not ten feet from Retherton, and again on a straight line for him.

"Damned if that ain't shootin'!" called Garry, and Retherton, alarmed, swung the buckskin out to one side to throw the marksman out of line. He had turned again in the saddle, and as though the episode were at an end, restored his rifle to its case; but when they poured in another volley about him, he swung sharply round about again, gun in hand. Once more the rifle went to his shoulder, and this time the bullet knocked a puff of dust into the very nostrils of the buckskin. Retherton reined in with an oath.

"He's been warnin' me, boys," he called. "That devil has the range like he was sitting in a rockin'-chair shooting at a tin-can. He's warnin' us back to the rest of the gang. And damned if we ain't goin'!"

It was quite patent that he was right, for three bullets sent on a line for one horse, and each of them closer, could mean only one thing. They checked their horses, and in a moment the rest of the posse was clattering around them.

"It don't make no difference," called Retherton, "savin' in time. Maybe he'll last to Wilsonville, but he can't stay it three miles when we hang into him with fresh hosses. The black is runnin' on nothin' but guts right now."

(To be concluded NEXT WEEK.)

The Seventh Man

Part VI

by Max Brand

Author of "Trailin'," "The Guide to Happiness," "Tiger," etc.

A Sequel to "The Untamed" and "The Night Horseman."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE ASPER.

NINETY miles of ground, at least, had been covered by the black stallion since he left Rickett that morning, yet when he galloped across the plain in full sight of Wilsonville there were plenty of witnesses who vowed that Satan ran like a colt frolicking over a pasture. Mark Retherton knew better, and the posse, to a man, felt the end was near. They changed saddles in a savage silence and went down the street out of town with a roar of racing hoofs.

And Barry too, as he watched them whip around the corner of the last house and streak across the fields, knew that the end of the ride was near. Strength, wind, and nerve was gone from Satan; his hoofs pounded the ground with the stamp of a plow-horse; his breath came in wheezes with a rattle toward the end; the tail no longer fluttered out straight behind. Yet when the master leaned and called he found something in his great heart with which to answer.

A ghost of his old buoyancy came in his stride, the drooping head rose, one ear quivered up; and he ran against the challenge of those fresh ponies from Wilsonville. There were men who doubted it when the tale was told, but Mark Retherton swore to the truth of it.

Even then that desperate effort was failing. Not all the generous will in the heart of the stallion could give his legs the speed they needed, and he fell back by inches, by feet, by yards, toward the posse. They disdained their guns now, and kept them in the cases; for the game was theirs.

And then they noted an odd activity in the fugitive, who had slipped to one side and was fumbling at his cinches. They could not understand for a time, but presently the saddle came loose, the cinches flipped out, and the whole apparatus crashed to the ground. Nor was this all. The rider leaned forward, and his hands worked on the head of his mount until the hackamore also came free and was tossed aside. To that thing fifteen good men and true swore the next day with strange oaths, and told how a man rode for his life on a

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horse that wore neither saddle nor bridle, but ran obediently to voice and hand.

Every ounce counted, and there were other ounces to be spared. He was leaning again, to this side and then to that, and presently the posse rushed past the discarded riding-boots.

There lay the rifle in its case on the saddle far behind. And with the rifle remained all the fugitive's chances of fighting at long range. Now, following, came the heavy cartridge-belt and the revolver with it. The very sombrero was torn from his head and thrown away.

His horse was failing visibly—not even this lightening could keep it away from the posse long—and yet the man threw away his sole chance of safety. And the fifteen pursuers cursed solemnly as they saw the truth. He would run his horse to death, and then die with it, empty-handed, rather than let either of them fall a captive.

Unburdened by saddle or gun or trapping, the stallion gave himself in the last effort. There ahead lay safety, if they could shake off this last relay of the posse, and for a time he pulled away until Retherton grew anxious, and once more the bullets went questing around the fugitive. But it was a dying effort. They gained; they drew away; and then they were only holding the posse even; and then, once more, they fell back gradually toward the pursuit. It was the end, and Barry sat bolt erect and looked around him; that would be the last of him and the last scene he should see.

There came the posse, distant but running closer. With every stride Satan staggered; with every stride his head drooped, and all the lilt of his running was gone. Ten minutes, five minutes more, and the fifteen would be around him. He looked to the river which thundered there at his side.

It was the very swiftest portion of all the Asper between Tucker Creek and Caswell City. Even at that moment, a few hundred yards away, a tall tree which had been undermined fell into the stream and dashed the spray high; yet even that fall was silent in the general roar of the river. Checked by the body and the branches of the tree for an instant before it should be torn away from the bank and shot down-stream, the waters boiled and left a comparatively smooth, swift-sliding current beyond the obstruction; and it gave to Barry a chance, or a ghost of a chance.

The central portion of the river-bed was chopped with sharp rocks which tore the stream into white rags of foam; but beyond these rocks, a little past the middle, the tree like a dam smoothed out the current; it was still swift, but not torn with swirls or cross-currents, and in that triangle of comparatively still water of which the base was the fallen tree, the apex lay on a sand bar jutting a few yards from the bank.

The forlorn hope of Barry was to swing the stallion a little distance away from the bank, run him with the last of his ebbing strength straight for the bank, and try to clear the rocky portion of the river-bed with a long leap that might, by the grace of God, shoot him into the comparatively protected current.

Even then it would be a game only a tithe won, for the chances were ten to one that before they could struggle close to the shore the currents would suck them out toward the center. They would never reach that shelving bit of sand, but the sharp rocks of the stream would tear them a moment later like teeth.

Yet the dimmest chance was a good chance now.

He called Satan away from his course, and at the change of direction the stallion staggered, but went on, turned at another call, and headed straight for the stream. He was blind with running, and he was numbed by the long horror of that effort, no doubt; but there was enough strength left in him to understand the master's mind. He tossed his head high, he flaunted out his tail, and sped with a ghost of his old sweeping gallop toward the bank.

"Bart!" shouted the master, and waved his arm.

And the wolf saw, too. He seemed to cringe for a moment, and then, like some old leader of a pack who knows he is about to die and defies his death, he darted for the river and flung himself through the air.

An instant later Satan reared on the bank and shot into the air. Below him the teeth of the rocks seemed to lift up in hunger, and the white foam jumped to take him. The crest of the arc of his jump was passed; he shot lower, and, grazing the last of the stones, he plunged out of sight in the swift water beyond. There were two falls, not one, for even while the black was in the air Barry slipped from his back and struck the water clear of Satan.

They came up again struggling in the last effort toward the shore. The impetus of their leap had washed them well in toward the bank, but the currents dragged them out again toward the center of the stream where the rocks waited. Down the river they went, and Black Bart alone had a ghost of a chance for success. His leap had been farther, and he skimmed the surface when he struck, so that by dint of fierce swimming he hugged close to the shore, and then his claws bedded in the sand bank.

As for Barry, the waters caught him and sent him spinning over and over, like a log, whipping down-stream, while the heavier body of Satan was struggling whole yards above. There was no chance for the master to reach the sand bank, and even if he reached it he could not cling; but the wolf-dog knew many things about water. In the times of famine, long years before the days of the master, there had been ways of catching fish.

He edged forward until the water foamed about his shoulders. Down came Dan, his arms tumbling as he whirled, and on the sleeve of one of those arms the teeth of Bart closed. The cloth was stout, and yet it ripped as if it were rotten veiling, and the tug nearly swept Bart from his place. Still, he clung; his teeth shifted their hold with the speed of light and closed over the arm of the master itself, slipped, sank deeper, drew blood, and held. Barry swung around, and a moment later stood with his feet buried firmly in the bank.

He had not a moment to spare, for Satan, only his eyes and his nose showing, rushed down the current, making his last fight. Barry thrust his feet deeper in the sand, leaned, buried both hands in the mane of the stallion. It was a far fiercer tug-of-war this time, for the ample body of the horse gave the water a greater surface to grapple on, yet the strength of the man sufficed. His back bowed; his shoulders ached with the strain; and then the forefeet of Satan pawed the sand, and all three staggered up the shelving bank, reeled among the shrubbery, and collapsed in safety.

So great was the roar of the water that they heard neither shouts nor the reports of the guns, but for several minutes the bullets of the posse combed the shrubbery as high as the breast of a man.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE EMPTY CAVE.

THROUGH ten months of the year a child of ten could wade the Asper, but now its deep roaring that set the ground quivering under Barry gave him perfect assurance of safety. Not one of that posse would attempt the crossing, he felt, but he slipped back through the shrubbery close to the bank to make sure. He was in time to see Mark Retherton give a command with gestures that sent reluctant guns into the holsters.

Fists were brandished toward the green covert on the farther side of the river, so close, such an unreachable distance. One or two rode their horses down to the very edge of the water, but they gave up the thought, and the whole troop turned back toward Wilsonville; even the horses were down-headed.

Back in the covert he found Bart lying with his head on his paws, his eyes closed, his sides swelling and closing till every rib seemed broken; yet now and then he opened one red eye to look at Satan. The stallion lay in almost exactly the same position, and the rush and rattle of his breathing was audible even in the noise of the Asper; Barry dropped prone and pressed his ear against the left side of the horse, just behind the shoulder. The fierce vibration fairly shook his head; he could *hear* the rush of the blood except when that deadly rattling of the breath came. When

he raised to his knees the face of the master was serious, thoughtful.

"Satan!" he called, but the river must have drowned his voice. Only when he passed his fingers down the wet neck, one of Satan's ears pricked, and fell instantly back. It would not do to let him lie there in the cool mold by the water, for he knew that the greatest danger in overheating a horse is that it may cool too quickly afterward.

He stooped directly in front of Satan and swept up an arm in command; it brought only a flicker of the eyelid, the eyelid which drooped over a glazing eye.

"Up!" he commanded.

One ear again pricked; the head lifted barely clear of the ground; the forelegs stiffened with effort, trembled, and were still again.

"Bart," shouted the master, "wake him up!"

The voice could not have carried to the wolf through the uproar of the waters, but the gesture, the expression brought home the order, and Black Bart came to his feet, staggering. Right against the nose of Satan he bared his great teeth and his snarl rattled. No living creature could hear that sound without starting, and the head of Satan raised high. Still before him Bart growled, and under his elbow and his chest the hands of the master strained up.

He swayed with a snort very like a human groan, struggled, the forelegs secured their purchase, and he came slowly to his feet. There he stood, braced and head low; a child might have caught him by the mane and toppled him upon his side, and already his hind legs were buckling.

"Get on!" cried Barry.

There was a lift of the head, a quivering of the tensed nostrils, but that was all. He seemed to be dying on his feet, when the master whistled. The sound cut through the rushing of the Asper as a ray of light probes a dark room, shrill, harsh, like the hissing of some incredible snake, and Satan went an uncertain step forward, reeled, almost fell; but the shoulder of the master was at his side, lifting up, and the arm of the master was under his chest, raising.

He tried another step; he went on among the trees with his forelegs sprawling and his head drooped as though he were trying to crop grass. Black Bart did his part to recall that flagging spirit. Sometimes it was his snarl that startled the black; sometimes he leaped, and his teeth clashed a hair's breadth from Satan's nose.

By degrees the congealing blood flowed freely again through Satan's body; he no longer staggered; and now he lifted a forepaw and struck vaguely at Bart as the wolf-dog leaped. Barry stepped away.

"Bart!" he called, and the shouting of the Asper was now so far away that he could be heard. "Come round here, old boy, and stop botherin' him. He's goin' to pull through."

He leaned against a willow, his face suddenly old and white with something more than exhaustion, and laughed in such an oddly pitched, cracked tone that the wolf-dog slunk to him on his belly and licked the dangling hand. He caught the scarred head of Bart and looked steadily down into the eyes of the wolf.

"It was a close call, Bart. There wasn't more than half an inch between Satan and—"

The black turned his head and whinnied feebly.

"Listen to him callin' for help like a new-foaled colt," said the master, and went to Satan.

The head of the stallion rested on his shoulder as they went slowly on.

"To-night," said the master, "you get two pieces of pone without askin'." The cold nose of the jealous wolf-dog thrust against his left hand. "You, too, Bart. You showed us the way."

The rattle had left the breathing of Satan, the stagger was gone from his walk; with each instant he grew perceptibly larger as they approached the border of the wood. It fell off to a scattering thicket with the Grizzly Peaks stepping swiftly up to the sky. This was their magic instant in all the day, when the sun, grown low in the west, with bulging sides, gave the mountains a yellow light. They swelled up larger with warm tints of gold rolling off into the blue of the cañons; at the foot of the nearest slope a thicket of quaking aspens was struck by a

breeze and flashed all silver. Not many moments more, and all the peaks would be falling back into the evening.

It seemed that Satan saw this, for he raised his head from the shoulder of the master and stopped to look.

"Step on," commanded Barry.

The stallion shook himself violently as a dog that knocks the water from his pelt, but he took no pace forward.

"Satan!"

The order made him sway forward, but he checked the movement.

"I ask you man to man, Bart," said the master in sudden anger, "was there ever a worse fool horse than him? He won't budge till I get on his back."

The wolf-dog shoved his nose again into Barry's hand and growled. He seemed quite willing to go on alone with the master and leave Satan forgotten.

"All right," said Barry. "Satan, are you comin'?"

The horse whinnied, but would not move.

"Then stay here."

He turned his back and walked resolutely across the meadow, but slowly, and more slowly, until a ringing neigh made him stop and turn. Satan had not stirred from his first halting-place, but now his head was high and his ears pricked anxiously. He pawed the ground in his impatience.

"Look there, Bart," observed the master gloomily. "There's pride for you. He won't let on that he's too weak to carry me. Now I'd ought to let him stay there till he drops."

He whistled suddenly, the call sliding up, breaking, and rising again with a penetrating appeal. Satan neighed again as it died away.

"If that won't bring him, nothin' will. Back we got to go. Bart, you jest take this to heart: it ain't any use tryin' to bring them to reason that ain't got any sense."

He went back and sprang lightly to the back of the horse, and Satan staggered a little under the weight, but at once, as if to prove that his strength was more than equal to the task, he broke into a trot. A harsh order called him back to a walk, and so they started up into the Grizzly Peaks.

By dark, however, a few halts, a chance to crop grass for a moment here and there, a roll by the next creek, and a short draft of water, restored a great part of the black's strength, and before the night was an hour old he was heading up through the hills at a long, swift trot.

Even then it was that dark, cold time just before dawn when they wound up the difficult pass toward the cave. The moon had gone down; a thin, high mist painted out the stars; and there were only varying degrees of blackness to show them the way, with peaks and ridges starting here and there out of the night very suddenly. It was so dark, indeed, that sometimes Dan could not see where Bart skulked a little ahead, weaving among the boulders and picking the easiest way. But all three of them knew the course by instinct, and when they came to a more or less commanding rise of ground in the valley Dan checked the stallion and whistled.

Then he sat canting his head to one side to listen more intently. A rising wind brought about him something like an echo of the sound, but otherwise there was no answer.

"She ain't heard," muttered Dan to Bart, who came running back at the call, so familiar to him and to the horse. He whistled again, prolonging the call until it soared and trembled down the gulch, and this time when he stopped he sat for a long moment, waiting, until Black Bart whined at his side.

"She ain't learned to sleep light yet," muttered Barry. "An' I s'pose she's plumb tired out waitin' for me. But if something's happened— Satan!"

That word sent the stallion leaping ahead at a racing gait, swerving among rocks which he could not see.

"They's nothin' wrong with her," whispered Barry to himself. "They *can't* be nothin' happened to her!"

He was in the cave a moment later, standing in the center of the place with the torch high above his head; it flared and glimmered in the great eyes of Satan and the narrow eyes of Bart. At length he slipped down to a rock beside him, while the torch, fallen from his hand, sputtered and whispered where it lay on the gravel.

"She's gone," he said to emptiness. "She's lef' me!"

Black Bart licked his limp hands, but dared not even whine.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BEN SWANN.

SINCE the night when old Joe Cumberland died and Kate Cumberland rode off after her wild man, Ben Swann, the foreman of the Cumberland ranch, had lived in the big house. He would have been vastly more comfortable in the bunk-house playing cards with the other hands, but Ben Swann felt vaguely that it was a shame for so much space in the ranch-house to go to waste, and besides, Ben's natural dignity was at home in the place even if his mind grew lonely.

It was Ben Swann, therefore, who ran down and flung open the door, on which a heavy hand was beating. Outside stood two men, very tall, taller than himself, and one of them a giant. They had about them a strong scent of horses.

"Get a light," said one of these. "Run for it. Get a light. Start a fire, and be damned quick about it!"

"And who the hell might you gents be?" queried Ben Swann, leaning against the side of the doorway to dicker.

"Throw that fool on his head," said one of the strangers, "and go on in, Lee!"

"Stand aside," said the other, and swept the door-knob out of Ben's grip, flattening Ben himself against the wall. While he struggled there, gasping, a man and a woman slipped past him.

"Tell him who we are," said the woman's voice. "We'll go to the living-room, Buck, and start a fire."

The strangers apparently knew their way, even in the dark, for presently he heard the scraping of wood on the hearth in the living-room. It bewildered Ben Swann. It was dreamlike, this sudden invasion.

"Now, who the devil are you?"

A match was scratched and held under his very nose, until Ben shrank back for fear that his splendid mustache might ignite. He found himself confronted by one of the largest men he had ever seen, a leonine face, vaguely familiar.

"You Lee Haines!" he gasped. "What are you doin' here?"

"You're Swann, the foreman, aren't you?" said Haines. "Well, come out of your dream, man. The owner of the ranch is in the living-room."

"Joe Cumberland's dead," stammered Ben Swann.

"Kate Cumberland."

"Her! And—Barry—the killing at Alder—"

"Shut up!" ordered Haines, and his face grew ugly. "Don't let that chatter get to Kate's ears. Barry ain't with her. Only his kid. Now stir about."

After the first surprise was over, Ben Swann did very well. He found the fire already started in the living-room, and on the rug before the hearth a yellow-haired little girl wrapped in a tawny hide. She was sound asleep, worn out by the long ride, and she seemed to Ben Swann a very pretty picture. Surely there could be in her little of the father of whom he had heard so much—of whom that story of the killing at Alder was lately told.

He took in that picture at a glance, and then went to rustle food; afterward he went down to sleep in the bunk-house, and at breakfast he recounted the events of the night with a relish. Not one of the men had been more than three years on the place, and therefore their minds were clean slates on which Swann could write his own impressions.

"Appearances is deceivin'," concluded the foreman. "Look at Mrs. Dan Barry. They tell you around these parts that she's pretty, but they don't tell you how *damned* fine-lookin' she is. She's got a soft look, and you'd never pick her for the sort that would run clean off with a gent like Barry. Barry himself wasn't so bad for looks, but they'll tell you in Elkhead how bad he is in action, and maybe they's some widders in Alder that could put in a word. Take even the kid. She looks no more'n a baby, but what d'you know is inside of her.

"Speakin' personal, gents, I don't put no kind of trust in that houseful yonder. Here

they come in the middle of the night like there was a posse after 'em. They climb that house and sit down and eat like they'd ridden all day. Maybe they had. Even while they was eatin' they didn't seem none too happy.

"That loose shutter up-stairs come around in the wind with a bang, and Buck Daniels comes out of his chair as fast as powder could blow him. He didn't say nothin' .Just sat down lookin' kind of sick, and the other two was the same way. When they talked, they'd bust off in the middle of a word and let their eyes go trailin' into some corner of the room that was plumb full of shadow. Then Lee Haines gets up and walks up and down.

"'Swann,' says he, 'how many good men have you got on the place?'

"'Why,' says I, 'they're all good!'

"'Huh,' says Haines, and he put a hand on my shoulder, 'just how good are they, Swann!'

"I seen what he wanted. He wanted to know how many scrappy gents was punchin' cows here; maybe them three up there figures that they might need help. From what? What was they runnin' away from?"

"Hey!" broke in one of the cow-punchers, pointing with a dramatic fork through the window.

It was a bright spot of gold that disappeared over the top of the nearest hill; then it came into view again, the whole body of a yellow-haired child, clothed in a wisp of white and running steadily toward the north.

"The kid!" gasped the foreman. "Boys, grab her. No, you'd bust her; I know how to handle her!"

He was gone through the door with gigantic leaps and shot over the crest of the low hill. Then those in the cook-house heard a small, tingling scream; after it came silence, and the tall foreman striding across the hill with the child high in his arms. He came panting through the door and stood her up on the end of the table, a small and fearless creature.

She wore on her feet the little moccasins which Dan himself had fashioned for her, but the tawny hide was not on her—perhaps her mother had thrown the garment away. The moccasins and the white nightgown were the sum and substance of her apparel, and the cow-punchers stood up around the table to admire her spunk.

"Darned near spat pizen," observed Ben Swann, "when I hung into her—tried to bite me, but the minute I got her in my hands she quit strugglin' as reasonable as a grown-up, by God!"

"Shut up, Ben. Don't you know no better'n to cuss in front of a kid?"

The great, dark eyes of Joan went somberly from face to face. If she was afraid, she disguised it well, but now and then, like a wild thing which sees that escape is impossible, she looked through the window and out over the open country beyond.

"Where was you headed for, honey?" queried Ben Swann.

The child considered him bravely for a time before she replied:

"Over there."

"Over there? Now, what might she mean by that? Headed for Elkhead—in a nightgown? Any place I could take you, kid?"

If she did not altogether trust Ben Swann, at least she preferred him to the other unshaven, work-thinned faces which leered at her around the table.

"Daddy Dan," she said softly. "Joan wants to go to Daddy Dan."

"Daddy Dan—Dan Barry," translated Ben Swann, and he drew a bit away from her. "Boys, that man-killin' devil must be around here; and that's what them up to the house was runnin' from—Barry!"

It scattered the others to the windows, to the door.

"What d'you see?"

"Nothin'."

"Swann, if Barry is comin' to these parts, I'm goin' to pack my war-bag."

"Me, too, Ben. Them that get ten thousand 'll earn it. *I* heard about the killin' at Alder."

"Listen to me, gents," observed Ben Swann. "If Barry is comin' here, we ain't none of us goin' to stay; but don't start jumpin' out from under till I get the straight of it. I'm goin' to take the kid up to the house right now and find out."

So he wrapped up Joan in an old blan-

ket, for she was shivering in the cold of the early morning, and carried her up to the ranch-house. The alarm had already been given. He saw Buck Daniels gallop toward the front of the place leading two saddled horses; he saw Haines and Kate run down the steps to meet them, and then they caught sight of the foreman coming with Joan on his shoulder.

The joy of that meeting, it seemed to Ben Swann, was decidedly one-sided. Kate ran to Joan with a little wailing cry of happiness and gathered her close, but neither big Lee Haines nor ugly Buck Daniels seemed overcome with happiness at regaining possession of Joan, and the child herself merely endured the fond caresses of her mother.

Ben Swann made them a speech. He told them that anybody with half an eye could tell they were bothered by something; that they acted as if they were running away. Now, running in itself was perfectly all right and quite in order when it was impossible to outface or outbluff a danger. He himself, Ben Swann, believed in such tactics. He wasn't a soldier; he was a cowpuncher. So were the rest of the boys out yonder, and though they'd stay by their work in ordinary times, and they'd face ordinary trouble, they were not minded to abide the coming of Dan Barry.

"So," concluded Swann, "I want to ask you straight: is him they call Whistlin' Dan comin' this way? Are you runnin' from him? And did you steal the kid from him?"

Lee Haines took upon his competent shoulders the duty of answering.

"You look like a sensible man, Swann," he said severely. "I'm surprised at you. In the first place, two men don't run away from one."

A fleeting smile appeared and disappeared on the lips of Ben Swann. Haines hastily went on: "As for stealing the baby from Dan Barry, good heavens, man, don't you think a mother has a right to her own child? Now go back to that scared bunch and tell them that Dan Barry is back in the Grizzly Peaks."

For several reasons this did not completely satisfy the foreman, but he postponed his decision. Lee Haines spoke like one in the habit of giving orders, and Swann walked slowly back to the cookhouse.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE NEW ALLIANCE.

"AND so," said Lee Haines, when he joined Buck Daniels in the living-room, "there goes our reenforcements. That whole crew will scatter like dead leaves when Barry breezes in. It looks to me—"

"Shut up!" cut in Daniels. "Shut up!"

His dark, homely face turned to the larger man with a singular expression of awe. He whispered: "D'you hear? She's in the next room whippin' Joan for runnin' away, and never a yap out of the kid!"

He held up a lean finger for caution, and then Haines heard the sound of the willow switch. It stopped.

"If you run away again," warned Kate, her voice pitched high and trembling, "munner will whip harder, and put you in a dark place for a long, long time."

Still there was not a sound of the child's voice, not even the pulse of stifled weeping. Presently the door opened and Kate stood there.

"Go out in the kitchen and tell Li to give you breakfast. Naughty girls can't eat with munner."

Through the door came Joan, her little round face perfectly white, perfectly expressionless. She did not cringe, passing her mother; she walked steadily across the room, rose on tiptoe to open the kitchen door, and disappeared through it. Kate dropped into a chair, shaking.

"Out!" whispered Buck to Lee Haines. "Beat it. I got to talk alone." And as soon as Haines obeyed, Buck sat down close to the girl. She was twisting and untangling her fingers in a dumb agony.

"What has he done to her, Buck? What has he done?"

It was a maxim with Buck that talk is to woman what swearing is to man; it is a safety valve, and therefore he waited in silence until the first rush of her grief had passed.

"She only looked at me when I whipped her. My heart turned in me. She didn't cry; she wasn't even angry. She just stood there—my baby—and looked at me!"

She threw herself back in the chair with her eyes closed, and he saw where the trouble had marked her face. He wanted to lean over and take her in his arms.

"I'm going mad, Buck. I can't stand it. How could he have changed her to this?"

"Listen to me, Kate. Joan ain't been changed. She's only showin' what she is."

The mother stared wildly at him.

"Don't look like I was a murderer. God knows I'm sorry, Kate, but if they's Dan's blood in your little girl it ain't my fault. It ain't anything he's taught her. It's just that bein' alone with him has brought out what she really is."

"I won't believe you, Buck; I don't dare listen to you!"

"You got to listen, Kate, because you know I'm right. D'you think that any kind of teachin' could make her learn how to stand and keep from cryin' when she was whipped?"

"I know."

She spoke softly, as if some terrible power might overhear them talk, and Buck lowered his voice in turn.

"She's wild, Kate." I knew it when I seen the way she handled Bart."

"Then I'll have her tame again."

"You tried that once and failed."

"Dan was a man when I tried, and his nature was formed. Joan is only a baby—my baby. She's half mine. She has my hair and my eyes."

"I don't care what the color of her eyes is. I know what's behind them. Look at 'em, and then tell me who she takes after."

"Buck, why do you talk like this? What do you want me to do?"

"A hard thing. Send Joan back to Dan."

"Never!"

"He'll never give her up, I tell you."

"Oh, God help me! What shall I do? I'll keep her! I'll make her tame."

"But you'll never keep her that way. Think of Dan. Think of the yaller in his eyes, Kate."

"Until I die," she said with sudden quiet, "I'll fight to keep her."

And he answered with equal solemnity: "Until Dan dies he'll fight to have her. And he's never been beat yet."

Through a breathing space he stared at her and she at him, and the eyes of Buck Daniels were the first to turn. Everything that was womanly and gentle had died from her face, and in its stead was something which made Buck rise and wander from the room.

He found Lee Haines, and told him briefly all that had passed. The great battle, they decided, had begun between Kate and Barry for the sake of the child, and that battle would go on until one of them was dead or the prize for which they struggled lost.

Barry would come on the trail and find them at the ranch, and then he would strike for Joan. And they had no help for the struggle against him. The cow-punchers would scatter at the first sign of Barry, at the first shrill of his ill-omened whistling. They might ride for Elkhead and raise a posse from among the citizens, but it would take two days to do that and gather a number of effective fighters for the crisis; and in the mean time the chances were large that Barry would strike the ranch while the messenger was away. There was really nothing to do but sit patiently and wait. They were both brave men, very; and they were both not unpractised fighters; but they began to wait for the coming of Barry as the prisoner waits for the day of his execution.

It spoke well for the quality of their nerves that they would not speak to Kate of the time to come; they sat back like spectators at a play and watched the maneuvers of the mother to win back Joan.

There was not an idle moment from breakfast to dark. They went out to gather wild flowers on the western hill from the house; they sat on the veranda, where Kate told Joan stories of the ranch and pointed out the distant mountains which were its boundaries, and explained that all between them would one day be her own land; that the men who rode yonder were doing her work; that the cattle who ranged the hills were marked with her brand. She said it all in small words so that Joan could un-

derstand, but as far as Buck and Lee could make out there was never a flicker of intelligence or interest in the eyes of the child.

It was a hard battle every hour, and after supper Kate sat in a big chair by the fire with her eyes half closed, admitting defeat, perhaps. For Joan was curled up on the couch at the fartherest, dimmest end of the room, and with her chin propped in both small hands she stared in silence through the window and over the darkening hills. Buck and Lee were there, never speaking, but now and then their eyes sought each other with a vague hope. For Kate might see that her task was impossible, send Joan back, and that would free them of the danger.

But where Kate left off, chance took up the battle and turned the scales. Old Li, the Chinese cook, had not seen Kate for six long years, and now he celebrated the return by hanging about her on a thousand pretexes. It was just after he had brought in some delicacy from the kitchen, leaving the door a little ajar, when a small ball of gray fur nosed its way through the aperture and came straight for the glare of the fire on the hearth.

It was a small shepherd puppy, and having observed the faces of the men with bright, unafraid eyes, it went wabbling on to the very hearth, sniffling. Even at that age it knew enough to keep away from the bright coals of wood, but how could it know that the dark, cold-looking andirons had been heated to the danger-point by the fire? It thrust out a tentative nose, touched the iron, and then its shrill yelp of pain went startlingly through the room. It pulled the three grown-ups out of their thoughts; it brought Joan scampering across the room with a little happy cry.

The puppy would have escaped if it could, for it had in mind the dark, warm, familiar corner in Li's kitchen where no harm ever came near, but the agile hands of Joan caught him; he was swept into her arms. That little wail of helpless pain, the soft fluff of fur against her cheek, wiped all other things from Joan's mind.

Out of the window and across the gloomy hills she had been staring at the picture of the cave, and bright-eyed Satan, and the shadowy form of Bart, and the swift, gentle hand of Daddy Dan; but the cry of the puppy blotted the picture out. She was no longer lonely, having this small, soft body to protect. There sat her mother, leaning a little toward her with a glance at once misted and bright, and she forgot forthwith all the agency of Kate in carrying her away from that cave of delight.

"Look, munner! He's burned his nose!"

The puppy was licking the injured nose industriously and whimpering the while. And Joan heard no answer from her mother except an inarticulate little sound somewhere deep in Kate's throat. Over her child mind, vaguely, like all baby memories, moved a recollection of the same sound coming deeply from the throat of the mother and marvelously soothing, reassuring.

It moved a fiber of trust and sympathy in Joan, an emotion as real as the sound of music, and with the puppy held idly in her arms for a moment she looked curiously into Kate's face. On her own, a faint smile began in the eyes and spread to the lips.

"Poor little puppy, munner," said Joan.

The hands of Kate trembled with desire to bring Joan closer to her, but very wisely she merely stroked the cringing head of the dog.

"Poor little puppy," she echoed.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

VICTORY.

THE entrance of the puppy, to liken small things to great, was the coming of Blücher in Kate's life, for the battle turned, and all in five minutes she had gone from defeat to victory. She sat by the fire with Joan sleeping in her arms, and the puppy in turn in the arms of Joan. It was such a foolish trick of chance that had given her all this, she was almost inclined to laugh, but something of tragedy in the faces of Buck and Lee Haines made her thoroughly serious. And she readily saw the truth. For after all, a child's brain is a small affair; it holds so much and no more.

One instant the longing for Dan was all that Joan could think of; the next she had

no room for anything more than the burned nose of the puppy. If there were other phases to this matter—such as Buck Daniels had pointed out—fear that in some future crisis the blood of the father might show in the child — Kate pushed such thoughts away. She was too full of the present happiness.

Now, while she sat there in the firelight, she sang softly into the dreams of Joan, and watched the smile of sleep grow and wane faintly on the lips of the child as the rhythm of her singing lifted and fell. One-half of her mind was empty, that part where Dan should have been, and a dozen times she checked an impulse to turn to him in the place where he should be sitting and invite him with a smile to share her happiness.

When her eyes moved they only fell on the gaunt, intent face of Buck or the leonine head of Haines. Whistling Dan was gone, and if he ever came again her fear of him, her fear for Joan, would be greater than her love. Yet Dan being gone so finally, she knew that she would never be truly happy again. Her spring of life was ended, but even now she was grateful for the full richness of those six years with Dan; and if she turned from him now it was only because a mighty instinct commanded her and a voice without words drove her: Joan must go on to a normal, womanly happiness.

Dan Barry lived from day to day, glutting himself with a ride in the wind, or the whistle of a far-off bird, or the wail of a mountain lion through the night. Each instant was to him complete, but the eye of Kate looked far away and saw the night when this daughter of hers should sit holding an infant by such a fire, and her heart was both empty and full.

It was no wonder, then, that she heard the first sound long before either Haines or Buck Daniels, for her mind was on guard against dangers which might threaten her baby.

The sound was a slipping, scratching noise on the veranda; then a breathing at the front door. Kate turned, and the men followed the terror of her eyes in time to see the door fall open, and a broad paw appear in the interval. The snaky head of Black Bart thrust into the room.

Without a word Daniels drew his gun.

"Wait!" commanded Kate. Joan awoke with a start at the sharpness of this voice. "Don't shoot, Buck. See that bit of paper under his throat. He's bringing a message."

"Bart!" cried Joan, slipping to the floor from her mother's lap; but when she ran toward the wolf-dog, that tremendous snarl of warning stopped her short. Bart slunk toward Kate.

"Look out, Kate!" cried Haines. "The black devil means murder."

"Don't move, or he'll go at your throat," she answered. "There's no danger to me. He's been ordered to go to me, and he won't let even Joan touch him. See!"

He had glided past the amazed, outstretched arms of Joan, and went straight to Kate and stopped beside her, obviously expectant. She reached for the slip of folded paper, and as her hand approached he crouched a little, growling; but it was only to caution her, apparently, and though he distrusted the hand, he allowed it to unfasten the missive.

She untwisted the note, and read aloud:

> "Kate, send Joan back to me, or I come for her. Send her with Bart."

It seemed as though the wolf-dog understood the written words, for now he moved toward Joan, and she, with a cry, dropped the squealing puppy and caught the great head of Bart in her arms. The puppy wailed, sitting down on his haunches, and quivering with grief.

"Daddy Dan wants me," explained Joan with bright eyes. "He's sent for me. Go quick, Bart!"

The big animal lay down to facilitate her mounting.

"Joan!" called Kate.

The child hesitated and turned toward her. Her mother had taken up that light revolver which Dan had taught her to use so well, and now, as she leveled it at the wolf-dog, Bart laid his fangs bare in silent hate. The weapons of Buck and Lee Haines were ready, and now Bart raised himself a little and commenced to drag gradually forward to leaping distance.

"Drop your gun, Kate," cautioned Buck. "For God's sake, drop your gun. Even if you hit him with a bullet, he'll be at your throat. Unless you kill him with the first shot, he'll have you. Drop your gun, and then he'll go at us."

But Joan knew perfectly well what those gleaming bits of steel meant. She had seen Daddy Dan shoot and kill, and now she ran screaming between Bart and danger.

"Munner!" she cried. "You bad, bad men. I won't let you hurt Bart. They won't hurt you, Bart," explained Joan, turning, much mollified, to the great wolf-dog. "They're just playin'. Now we'll go." And she started toward the door, with Bart slinking in front and keeping a watchful lookout from a corner of his eye.

"Are you going to leave the poor little puppy, Joan?" said the mother, keeping her voice steady, for all the force of the two men could not help her now. It rested with her wit.

"I'll take him with me," answered Joan, and caught up the howling puppy from the floor. His wails died out against her breast.

"But you mustn't do that, honey. He'd die in this cold night-wind long before you got there."

"Oh!" sighed Joan, and considered her mother with great eyes.

Black Bart turned and uneasily tugged at her dress.

"Will you take good care of him, munner? Till I come back?"

"But I don't know how to take care of him, dear. If you go he'll cry and cry and cry until he dies."

Joan sighed.

"See how quiet he is when you hold him, Joan!"

"Oh!" muttered Joan again. The distress of the problem made her wrinkle her forehead. She turned to Kate for help.

"Munner, what 'll I do?"

"You'd best stay here until the puppy is strong enough to go with you."

She kept her voice well under control; it would not do to show the slightest emotion, and now she sat down and half turned away from the child. With her eyes she flashed a signal at the two troubled men, and they followed her lead. Their center of vision was now upon the fire. It left Joan, to all appearances, quite out of notice.

"Oh, that 'll be a long, long time, munner."

"Only a little while, Joan."

"But Daddy Dan 'll be lonesome up there."

"He has Satan and Bart to keep him company."

"Don't you think he wants Joan, munner?"

"Not as much as the poor little puppy wants you, Joan." She added, with just the slightest tremor: "You decide for yourself, Joan. Go, if you think it is best."

"Bart, what 'll Joan do?" queried the child, turning in dismay toward the wolf-dog, but as soon as he saw the puppy in her arms he greeted her with a murderous snarl.

"You see," suggested her mother, "that Black Bart would eat up the poor little puppy if you went now with him."

At this alarming thought Joan shrank away from Bart, and when he followed her anxiously she cried: "Go away! Bad dog! Bad Bart!"

He caught the edge of her dress and drew back toward the door, and this threw Joan into a sudden panic. She struck Bart across his wrinkled forehead.

"Go away!"

He slunk back, snarling at the puppy.

"Go back to Daddy Dan." Then, as he pricked his ears, still growling like distant thunder: "Go tell Daddy Dan that Joan has to stay here a while. Munner, how long?"

"Maybe a week, dear."

"A whole week?" she cried, dismayed.

"Perhaps only one or two or three days," said Kate.

Some of her tenseness was leaving as she saw victory once more inclining to her standards.

"One, two, five days," counted Joan, "and then come for me again. Tell Daddy Dan that, Bart."

His eyes left her and wandered around the room, lingering for a vicious instant on the face of each, then he backed toward the door.

"He's clear of Joan now, Kate," whispered Buck. "Let me shoot!"

"No, no! Don't even look at him."

Then, with a scratching of sudden claws, Bart whirled at the door and was gone like a bolt down the hall. Afterward for a time there was no sound in the room except the murmurings of Joan to her puppy, and then they heard that most mournful of sounds on the mountain desert, the long howl of a wolf which has missed its kill and hunts hungry on a new trail.

CHAPTER XL.

THE FAILURE.

WHEN Black Bart returned without Joan, without even a note of answer about his neck, the master made ready to take by force. First he went over his new outfit of saddle and guns, looking to every strap of the former, and the latter, revolvers and rifles, he weighed and balanced with a meditative look, as if he were memorizing their qualities against a time of need.

With Satan saddled and Bart on guard at the mouth of the cave, he gathered up all the accumulation of odds and ends, provisions, skins, and made a stirring bonfire in the middle of the gravel floor. It was like burning his bridges before starting out to the battle; he turned his back to the cave and started on his journey.

He had to travel in a loose semicircle, for there were two points which he must reach on the ride—the town of Alder, where lived the seventh man who must die for Grey Molly, and the Cumberland ranch, last of all, where he would take Joan. Very early after his start he reached the plateau where he had lived all those years with Kate, and he found it already sinking back to ruin, with nothing in the corrals, and the front door swinging to and fro idly in the wind, just as Joan had often played with it.

Inside, he knew, the rooms were empty; a current of air down the chimney had scattered the ashes from the hearth all about the living-room. Here must be a chair overturned, and there the sand had drifted through the open door. All this he saw clearly enough with his mind's eye, and urged Satan forward. For a chill like the falling of sudden night had swept over him, and he shrugged his shoulders with relief when he swept past the house.

Yet when he came to the long down-slope which pitched into the valley so far below him, he called Satan to a halt again, and swung to look at the house. He could hear the clatter of the front door as it swung; it seemed to be waving a farewell to him.

It was all the work of a moment to ride back, gather a quantity of paper and readily inflammable materials, soak them in oil, and scratch a match. The flames swept up the sides of the logs and caught on the ceiling first of all, and Dan Barry stood in the center of the room until the terrified whining of Black Bart and the teeth of the wolf-dog at his trousers made him turn and leave the house.

Outside he found Satan trembling between two temptations—the first to run as far and as fast as he could from that most terrible thing, fire; and the second to gallop straight into the blaze. The voice of the master, a touch quieted him, and Black Bart lay down at the feet of the master and looked up into his face.

By this time the fire had licked away a passage through the roof, and through this it sent up a yellow hand that flicked up and down like a signal, or a beckoning, and then shot up a tall, steady, growing, roaring column of red. No man could say what went through the mind of Dan Barry as he stood there watching the house of his building burn, but now he turned and threw his arms over the neck and back of Satan, and dropped his forehead against the withers of the black. It troubled the stallion. He turned his head, and nosed the shoulder of the master gently, and Black Bart, in an agony of anxiety, reared up beside Dan and brought his head almost up to the head of the man; there he whined pleadingly, for never before had he seen the master hide his face.

A deep, short report made the master stand away from Satan. The fire had reached a small stock of powder, and the shock of the explosion was followed by a

great crashing and rending as an inner wall went down. That fall washed a solid mass of yellow flame across the front door, but the fire fell back, and then Dan saw the doll which he himself had made for Joan; it had been thrown by the smashing of the wall squarely in front of the door, and now the fire reached after it—long arms across the floor.

It was an odd contrivance, singularly made of carved wood and with arms and legs fastened on by means of bits of strong sinew, and Joan prized it above all the rosy-faced dolls which Kate had bought for her. For an instant Dan stood watching the progress of the fire, then he leaped through the door, swerved back as an arm of fire shot out at him, ran forward again, caught up the doll, and was outside rubbing away the singed portions of brows and lashes.

He did not wait until the house was consumed, but when the flames stood towering above the roof, shaking out to one side with a roar when the wind struck them, he mounted Satan once more, and made for the valley.

He wanted to reach Alder at dark, and he gaged the time of his ride so accurately that when he pulled out of the mouth of Murphy's Pass the last light of the day was still on the mountains and in the pass, but it was already dark in the village, and a score of lights twinkled up at him like eyes.

He left Satan and Bart well outside the town, for even in the dark they might easily be recognized, and then walked straight down the street of Alder. It was a bold thing to do, but he knew that the first thing which is seen and suspected is the skulker who approaches from covert to covert. They knew he had ridden into Alder before in the middle of the night, and they might suspect the danger of such another attack, but they surely would not have fear of a solitary pedestrian unless a telltale light were thrown upon his face.

He passed Captain Lorrimer's saloon. Even in this short interval it had fallen into ill-repute after the killing at Alder. And a shanty farther down the street now did the liquor business of the town; Captain Lorrimer's was closed, and the window nailed across with slats He went on. Partly by instinct, and partly because it was aflame with lights, he moved straight to the house at which he had learned tidings of three men he sought on his last visit to Alder.

Now there were more lights showing from the windows of that place than there were in all the rest of Alder; at the hitching-racks in front horses stood tethered in long double rows, and a noise of voices rolled out and up and down the street. Undoubtedly, there was a festival there, and all Alder would turn out to such an affair—all Alder, including Vic Gregg, the seventh man.

A group came down the street for the widow's house; they were laughing and shouting, and they carried lanterns; away from them Barry slipped like a ghost and stood in the shadow of the house.

There might be other such crowds, and they were dangerous to Barry, so now he hunted for a means of breaking into the house of the widow unseen. The windows, as he went down the side of the building, he noted to be high, but not too high to be reached by a skilful, noiseless climber. In the back of the house he saw the kitchen door, illumined indeed, but the room, as far as he could see, empty.

Then, very suddenly, a wave of silence began somewhere in a side of the house, and swept across it, dying to a murmur at the edges. Barry waited for no more maneuvers, but walked boldly up the back stairs and entered the house, hat in hand.

The moment he passed the door he was alert, balanced. He could have swung to either side, or whirled and shot behind him with the precision of a leisurely marksman, and as he walked he smiled happily, with his head held high. He seemed so young, then, that one would have said he had just come in gaily from some game with the other youths of Alder.

Out of the kitchen he passed into the hall, and there he understood the full meaning of the silence, for both the doors to the front room were open, and through the doors he heard a single voice, deep and solemn, and through the

doors he saw the crowd standing motionless. Their heads did not stir—heads on which the hair was plastered smoothly down—and when some one raised a hand to touch an itching ear or nose, he moved his arm with such caution that it seemed he feared to set a magazine of powder on fire. All their backs were toward Barry, where he stood in the hall, and as he glided toward them, he heard the deep voice stop, and then the trembling voice of a girl speak in reply.

At the first entrance he paused, for the whole scene unrolled before him. It was a wedding. Just in front of him, on chairs and even on benches, sat the majority of adult Alder—facing these stood the wedding pair with the minister just in front of them. He could see the girl to one side of the minister's back, and she was very pretty, very femininely appealing now, in a dress which was a cloudy effect of white; but Barry gave her only one sharp glance. His attention was for the men of the crowd. And although there were only backs of heads and side glimpses of faces, he hunted swiftly for Vic Gregg.

But Gregg was not there. He surveyed the assembly twice, incredulous, for surely the tall man should be here; but when he was on the very point of turning on his heel and slinking down the hall to pursue his hunt in other quarters, the voice of the minister stopped, and the deep tone of Vic himself rolled through the room.

It startled Barry like a voice out of the sky; he stared about, bewildered, and then as the minister shifted his position a little he saw that it was Gregg who stood there beside the girl in white—it was Gregg being married. And at the same moment the eyes of Vic lifted, wandered, fell upon the face which stood there framed in the dark of the doorway.

Dan saw the flush die out, saw the narrow, single-purposed face of Gregg turn white, saw his eyes widen, and his own hand closed on his gun. Another instant; the minister turned his head, seemed to be waiting, and then Gregg spoke in answer: "I will."

A thousand pictures rushed through the mind of Barry, and he remembered first and last the wounded man on the gray horse who he had saved, and the long, hard ride carrying that limp body to the cabin in the mountains. The man would fight. By the motion of Gregg's hand, Dan knew that he had gone even to his wedding armed. He had only to show his own guns to bring on the crisis, and in the mean time the eyes of Vic held steadily upon him past the shoulder of the minister, without fear, desperately.

In spite of himself Dan's hand could not move his gun. In spite of himself he looked to the confused, happy face of the girl. And he felt as he had felt when he set fire to his house up there in the hills. The wavering lasted only a moment longer; then he turned and slipped noiselessly down the hall, and the seventh man who should have died for Grey Molly was still alive.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE WILD GEESE.

TWENTY-FOUR hours from Alder to Elkhead, and beyond Elkhead to the Cumberland ranch, is long riding and hard riding, but not far after dark on the following night Joan lifted her head, where she played with the puppy on the hearth, and listened. There was no sound audible to the others in the living-room; they did not even mark the manner in which she sat up, and then rose to her feet. But when she whispered "Daddy Dan!" it brought each of the three out of his chair.

Still they heard nothing, and Buck and Lee Haines would have retaken their chairs had not Kate gone to the window and thrown it wide. Then they caught it, very far off, very thin and small, a delicate thread of music, an eery whistling. Without a word she closed the window, crossed the room, and from the table she took up a cartridge-belt from which hung the holster with the revolver which Whistling Dan had taught her to use so well. She buckled it about her.

Lee Haines and Daniels, without a word, imitated her actions. Their guns were already on—every moment since they reached the ranch they had gone armed—but now

they looked to them, and tried the actions a few times before they thrust them back into the holsters.

It was odd to watch them. They were like the last remnant of a garrison, outworn with fighting, which prepares in grim quiet for the final stand.

The whistling rose a little in volume now. It was a happy sound, without a recognizable tune, but a gay, wild improvisation as if a violinist, drunk, was remembering snatches of masterpieces, throwing out lovely fragments here and there and filling the intervals out of his own excited fancy. Joan ran to the window, forgetful of the puppy, and kneeled there in the chair, looking out. The whistling stopped as Kate drew down the curtain to cut out Joan's view. It was far too dark for the child to see out, but she often would sit like this, looking into the dark.

The whistling began again as Joan turned silently on her mother, uncomplaining, but with a singular glint in her eyes, a sort of flickering, inward light that came out by glances and starts. Now the sound of the rider blew closer and closer. Kate gestured the men to their positions, one for each of the two inner doors, while she herself took the outer one.

There was not a trace of color in her face, but otherwise she was as calm as a stone, and from her an atmosphere pervaded the room, so that men also stood quietly at their posts. They had their unspoken order from Kate. She would resist to the death, and she expected the same from them. They were prepared.

Still that crescendo of the whistling continued; it seemed as if it would never reach them; it grew loud as a bird singing in that very room, and still it continued to swell, increase—then suddenly went out. As if it were the signal for which she had been waiting all these heart-breaking moments, Kate opened the front door, ran quickly down the hall, and stood an instant later on the path in front of the house. She had locked the doors as she went through, and now she heard one of the men rattling the lock to follow her. The rattling ceased. Evidently they decided that they would hold the fort as they were.

Her heel hardly sank in the sand when she saw him. He came out of the night like a black shadow among shadows, with the speed of the wind to carry him. A light creak of leather as he halted, a glimmer of starlight on Satan as he wheeled, a click of steel, and then Dan was coming up the path.

She knew him perfectly even before she could make out the details of the form; she knew him by the light, swift, almost noiseless step, like the padding footfall of a great cat—a sense of weight without sound. Another form skulked behind him —Black Bart.

He was close, very close, before he stopped, or seemed to see her, though she felt that he must have been aware of her since he first rode up. He was so close, indeed, that the starlight—the brim of his hat standing up somewhat from the swift riding—showed his face quite clearly to her. It was boyish, almost, in its extreme youth, and so thinly molded, and his frame so lightly made, that he seemed one risen from a wasting bed of sickness. The wind fluttered his shirt, and she wondered, as she had wondered so often before, where he gained that incredible strength in so meager a body. In all her life she had never loved him as she loved him now. But her mind was as fixed as a star.

"You can't have her. She's mine. I'll die to keep her."

Now the moon, which had been buried in a drift of clouds, broke through them and seemed in an instant to slide a vast distance toward the earth, a crooked half-moon with its edges eaten by the mist. Under this light she could see him more clearly, and she became aware of the thing she dreaded, the faint smile which barely touched at the corners of his mouth; and in his eyes a swirl of yellow light, half guessed at, half real.

All her strength poured out of her. She felt her knees buckle, felt the fingers about the light revolver butt relax, felt every nerve grow slack. She was helpless, and it was not fear of the man, but of the something which stalked behind him, inhuman, irresistible; not the wolf-dog, but something more than Satan and Bart and

Whistling Dan, something of which they were only a part.

He began to whistle, thoughtfully, like one who considers a plan of action and yet hesitates to begin. She felt his eyes run over her, as if judging how he should put her most gently to one side; then from the house, very lightly, hardly more than an echo of Dan's whistling, came an answer—the very same refrain.

Joan was calling to him.

At that he stepped forward, but the thing which stirred him had hardened the mind of Kate. The weakness passed in a flash. It was Joan, and for Joan!

"Not a step!" she whispered, and jerked out her gun. "Not a step!"

He stood with one hand trailing carelessly from his hip, and at the gleam of her steel his other hand dropped to a holster, fumbled there, and came away empty; he could not touch her, not with the weight of a finger. That thoughtful whistle came again; once more the answering whistle drifted out from the house; and he moved forward another pace.

She had chosen her mark carefully—the upper corner of the seam of the pocket upon his shirt, and before his foot struck the ground she fired. For an instant she felt that she had missed the mark, for he stood perfectly upright, but then she saw that the yellow was gone from his eyes. They were empty of everything except a great wonder. He wavered to his knees, and then sank down with his arms around Black Bart. He seemed, indeed, to crumple away into the night. Then she heard a shouting and trampling in the house, and a breaking open of doors, and she knew that she had killed Whistling Dan.

She would have gone to him, but the snarl of Bart drove her back. Then she saw Satan galloping up the path and come to a sliding halt, where he stood with his delicate nose close to the face of the master. There was no struggle with death, only a sigh like a motion of wind in far-off trees, and then softly, easily, Black Bart extricated himself from the master and moved away down the path, all wolf, all wild. Behind him Satan whirled with a snort, and they rushed away into the night, each in an opposite direction. The long companionship of the three was ended, and the seventh man was dead for Grey Molly.

Lee Haines and Buck Daniels were around her now. She heard nothing distinctly, only a great, vague clamor of voices while she kneeled and turned the body of Barry on its back. It was marvelously light; she could almost have picked it up in her arms, she felt. She folded the hands across his breast, and the limp fingers were delicate as the fingers of a sick child. Buck Daniels lay prone by the dead man, weeping aloud; and Lee Haines stood with his face buried in his hands; but there was no tear on the face of Kate.

As she closed the eyes—empty, hollow eyes—she heard the distant calling, hoarse, a sort of dissonant chiming. She looked up and saw a wedge of wild geese flying low across the moon.

(The end.)

TOGETHER

AMBITION is a friend of mine;
We walk life's way together,
It matters not if skies be fine,
Or dark and rough the weather.

Were I alone, the hills so steep,
So rough the path we follow,
That I perchance would never creep
Beyond the nearest hollow.

But strong Ambition takes my hand,
His eager face all glowing,
And thus we journey toward a land
With milk and honey flowing.

And even though the way be long,
And rough and dark the weather,
Upon our lips there's still a song,
Because we walk together!

Gertrude Louise Small.

ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

Dan Barry's Daughter

by Max Brand

The Long Awaited Sequel

¢ PER COPY

JUNE 30

BY THE YEAR $4.00

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLII — CONTENTS FOR JUNE 30, 1923 — NUMBER 4

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FIVE CONTINUED STORIES

Dan Barry's Daughter . . . . . Max Brand 484
A Six-Part Story — Part One

Cheero, Inc. . . . . Jack Bechdolt 526
A Four-Part Story—Part Two

A Gentleman in Pajamas . . . . . Charles Neville Buck . . . 555
A Six-Part Story—Part Three

A Million to One Chance . . . . Elizabeth York Miller . . 581
A Five-Part Story — Part Four

Garland the Great . . . . . Wyndham Martyn . . . 607
A Seven-Part Story — Part Seven

NOVELETTE AND SHORT STORIES

Puzzle Profound . . . . . C. S. Montanye 504
Paid Out . . . . . Howard R. Marsh . . . 548
The Rocking-Chair Sign . . . . . E. K. Means 573
Brass Tacks and Paint . . . . . Henry Holt 601
Mary Waits by the Window . . . . Courtenay Savage 625
The Colonel Goes Broke . . . . . George C. Jenks 633

MISCELLANEOUS AND POETRY

The Mastery of Max Brand 481

The Good Old Days . Richard Butler Glaenzer 503
Aladdin . . . . . Aaron Davis 525
The Handbreaker . . . . Strickland Gillilan 554
Give Me Your Hand . Robert Wilson Stevenson 580
In Memoriam . . . . Harry M. East, Jr. 600
Houses . . . . . Mazie V. Caruthers 624
Expediency . . . . . Geo. A. Wright 632
The Quiet Eye . . . . . Eliza Cook 640

THE love of a strong man, handicapped but undaunted, the weak selfishness of a favorite of fortune, the shortsighted greed of an old banker, and the grim, undying hatred of a dishonored Indian of high caste are the elements woven into a powerful story.

PIT OF THE GOLDEN DRAGON

BY WILLIAM DUDLEY PELLEY

is a four-part serial, of which the first installment appears next week.

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, 280 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, and TEMPLE HOUSE, TEMPLE AVENUE, E. C., LONDON

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLII | SATURDAY, JUNE 30, 1923 | NUMBER 4

THE MASTERY OF MAX BRAND

A genius of romance adds to his triumphs another splendid story, DAN BARRY'S DAUGHTER, beginning with this issue of the Argosy-Allstory Weekly.—"Whistling Dan," the man with the yellow eyes and untamed heart, is no more, but he left to Joan, his girl-child, a vital legacy of wanderlust.—Every reader who feels the lure of the gypsy trail, will revel in this great novel of love and adventure.

MAX BRAND, a master craftsman of the written word, has created many vivid characters for presentation to our readers who unanimously are his admirers. He particularly knows his Westerners of to-day, and yesterday, and long ago. His knowledge is photographic of mountain, and foothill, and plain, and desert.

And of all the daring men in a colorful company of gun-fighters and hard riders, "Whistling Dan" Barry has won first place in the judgment of the reading public. Here is a wild soul, as alien to the bonds of civilization as an eagle to the bars of a cage. His spirit demanded wide spaces; he was forever hearkening for the magical call of the wild geese to follow on and on beyond the beckoning horizon.

Dan Barry is the living, breathing substance of the dream that is in all of us. Who would not joyously migrate with the birds from North to South and back again? We lack physical wings for this annihilation of space, but the rich fancy of Max Brand lifts our imaginations to keep pace with the wild geese a-wing across the face of the moon.

THE UNTAMED, appearing in the *All-Story Magazine*, December 7, 1918, to

January 11, 1919, has as its chief character Dan Barry, then a lad of ten years, found wandering but unafraid in the pitiless desert. Joe Cumberland, rancher and ranger, is his rescuer and makes every effort to locate the boy's people, but in vain, and gradually accepts him in the status of son. As Dan grows up he develops an attitude of smiling deadliness, as if the desert from which he escaped had marked him with both its charm and its menace. His cheerful whistling is like the wind in the sage and gives him the nickname of "Whistling Dan," but his eyes of fire and wrists of steel make grown men thoughtful in his presence. He curbs Satan, a demon of a horse, to obey his will, and his constant guardian is Black Bart, a savage, long-fanged brute more wolf than dog. Gentle Kate Cumberland, daughter of the rancher, suddenly discovers that her sisterly attachment to the handsome youth has been displaced by a passion that makes her heart throb in delicious panic. The father is reasonably fond of Dan, but he does not regard with favor the idea of his daughter linking her destiny with an untamed mate whose local history began as a stray maverick in the desert. Cumberland, already apprehensive over his foster son's future, forbids him to carry firearms. The youth's natural aptitude with revolver or rifle is uncanny, and with a borrowed weapon he astounds onlookers by hitting silver dollars thrown into the air. Jim Silent, leader of an outlaw gang, provokes Dan into a fist fight. Silent is big and brawny and a bruiser, but he cannot stand against the rapierlike jabs and jolts of the young boxer. To save himself from a knockout, Silent strikes Dan with a chair. On recovering consciousness the youth swears to kill his unfair opponent and sets out in pursuit.

Kate Cumberland, distraught at his absence, follows him in company with Lee Haines, one of Silent's men, in the hope of persuading him to return unavenged. When the two young folks meet, Dan accuses Kate of double-crossing him and stigmatizes her with the epithet of "Delilah!" The bandits make a prisoner of Kate, but offer her no harm. Reënforced by Ted Calder, sheriff, and young Buck Daniels, who had been a member of the gang, Dan again takes up the trail of Silent, who meanwhile had staged a train robbery. Calder encounters Silent, who mortally wounds him and flees. Lee Haines is captured by Dan Barry, who later rescues him from lynchers and turns him loose, mistakenly believing that Kate Cumberland is in love with the outlaw. Dan himself is now a fugitive from a vengeful law, and he is given shelter by Buck Daniels. When Dan and Silent finally meet, Dan slays the huge bandit with his bare hands, and thus is reinstated in public opinion as a straight man. Thereafter, he learns that Kate Cumberland truly loves him, but they do not marry because Barry hearkens to the wild geese calling as they fly South out of the snowy North. When he disappears Kate remains constant to him, basing her hopes on his return when spring comes again and the wild geese fly up out of the sunny South.

THE NIGHT HORSEMAN, a sequel to THE UNTAMED, was published in the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY, September 18 to October 23, 1920. Kate Cumberland rides into Elkhead to get a doctor for her father, who is strangely ailing from a disease that appears more mental than physical. The local physician is absent, but Dr. Randall Byrne, a young and famous scientist who is himself an invalid seeking health and strength in the West, responds to the call. He finds the old rancher in the stupor of a hopeless yearning for some word that if it reaches him not he will die. In town Dr. Byrne had heard a rumor of a dangerous man, a half wild horse and a half tamed wolf, and now he learns that this remarkable trio is the cause of his patient's psychic ailment. Moreover, he discovers that Buck Daniels, once an outlaw, but now a rancher, loves Kate Cumberland with a deep, self-sacrificing devotion. She, however, is breaking her heart because "Whistling Dan" Barry, her foster brother, does not return to pay court to her. He had disappeared when the wild geese flew South, and now that they are winging North again the man does not come. The city doctor, with inescapable logic, proves to Daniels that he must fetch the wanderer back to Kate and her stricken father, and Buck sets out on his mission.

Meanwhile, far away, Dan Barry encounters young Jerry Strann, a terror with a gun, and beats him to the draw. Mac Strann, giant brother of Jerry and reputed unbeatable in gun-play, is seeking Dan to wreak a blood vengeance. Buck Daniels now locates Barry and, to save him from trouble with Mac Strann, strikes him in

the face and flees, knowing well that Dan will pursue him to wipe out the insult. Thus Dan Barry is lured back to the Cumberland ranch. The returned, but hostile, prodigal is on the verge of slaying Daniels, but learns in time the true unselfishness of this friend and withholds his fire. Kate and Dan have an understanding that brings them into each other's arms.

Mac Strann, following the trail of his enemy, wounds Barry's wolf, Black Bart, and makes a vain attempt to destroy his black stallion, Satan, by setting fire to the stable. Kate Cumberland, conquering her woman's fear, doctors the wounded wolf in his absence and wins a half allegiance from the four-legged fury. When the brute recovers from his injury he leads Barry to Mac Strann, but just as the stage is set for the death grapple Strann is swept away in a flood and Barry gallantly saves him from drowning. Thereafter, there can be no fight between them.

Dr. Byrne, by now deeply smitten with Miss Cumberland's gentle beauty, tries to make her see that Barry is more kin to the things of the wild than to his human kind, but she is helplessly in love with the handsome untamed horseman. On a mad night she goes away with Whistling Dan, and loyal Buck Daniels makes her dying father believe that Barry soon will bring her back to the home ranch.

THE SEVENTH MAN, a sequel to THE UNTAMED and THE NIGHT HORSEMAN, was printed in the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY, October 1 to December 5, 1921. It opens with Vic Gregg, a miner, in love with pretty Betty Neal, a school-teacher. He rides into town to pay her a surprise visit, and finds that she has promised to go to a dance with big, handsome Blondy Hansen, a cowboy. The lovers quarrel and part in a sullen temper. Gregg drinks to drown his sorrow, and while in a quarrelsome mood, encounters Hansen. In a gun-fight Hansen is killed and Gregg flees into the mountains, pursued by Sheriff Pete Glass. When Gregg, wounded in the shoulder with a rifle bullet and mounted on a failing horse, encounters Whistling Dan Barry, the latter saves him from the posse. Gregg swoons from his wound and recovers consciousness in a cabin where he is attended by a beautiful woman and a lovely little girl, wife and daughter of Dan Barry. Later Barry, mounted on Gregg's mare, Gray Molly, attempts to set a false trail for the posse, but a chance shot kills her. Dan, in revenge, shoots one of the posse. Gregg, trying to escape afoot, blunders into the posse and is arrested.

Meanwhile, Buck Daniels and Lee Haines, prospecting in the mountains, have stumbled onto the retreat of their old friend, Dan Barry. Yielding to the call of the wild geese, he announces that he is going away on Satan, his black stallion, but his friends prevail on him to wait a while. Vic Gregg is released on parole and returns to Betty Neal, who tells him that Barry is in town. Gregg, sensing that his rescuer has turned killer with his hand against all men, hurries off into the night to warn his townspeople and also to protect Barry from harm if possible. But Dan is ambushed and in the resulting fight Bart, the wolf, kills one man; Satan, the stallion, slays another and his rider shoots a third. Then Barry hides in a remote cave with his five-year-old daughter, his horse and his dog, and when the child's mother finds them the little one elects to remain with her father.

Barry next brazenly enters town and joins the posse searching for himself. He tricks Pete Glass, the sheriff, into a locked room and beats him to the draw. Glass's death makes the sixth, including the tragedy that made Gregg a fugitive. While Barry is riding away from the posse his wife takes little Joan from the cave and flees to her home ranch. Barry once more goes to town looking for the seventh man whom he has marked for death—Vic Gregg, who really is responsible for all the killings. He finds a wedding ceremony in progress and the happy man is Gregg, and under this circumstance the killer turns away without pulling trigger. Barry now rides to the Cumberland ranch determined to take away with him his little daughter, Joan. Kate, his wife, faces him in the protective rage of mother love, and when he refuses to halt she shoots him dead. Thus, the seventh man dies, and Whistling Dan's black stallion Satan and his wolf dog Bart dash off into the night, masterless.

DAN BARRY'S DAUGHTER, a six part serial, is a sequel to the three foregoing stories. Whistling Dan appears only reminiscently in the narrative, but from beyond the grave he weaves a magic spell over Joan, his child.

Dan Barry's Daughter

By MAX BRAND

Author of "The Night Horseman," "Black Jack," "The Seventh Man," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE WILD GEESE ARE CALLING—CALLING.

SOMETIMES it sounded like the barking of dogs rushing down a trail and closing on their quarry; and again there was a shower of calls like no other sound on earth; and sometimes single voices came dropping, telling wonderfully of distance. So the wild geese came out of darkness, dipping toward the earth, and were lost again in the northern night.

Joan closed her book. Over her shoulder had slipped a heavy braid of dark, metal-gold hair; she put it back with an involuntary gesture, and raised her face, but all she saw were the hewn beams which supported the upper floor of the ranch-house. Darkened by the smoke that had rolled out of the stove on many a winter evening, they still showed every stroke of the ax which had formed them.

If she heard the rustling of the newspaper which Buck Daniels lowered to look at her, she paid no attention to him, not even when he sat up and watched her with a frown of alarm. For she laid aside her book and went to the window. By pressing close to the pane she could look past the reflection of the room and the high light which the lamp threw in the glass; she could look past this to the shadow of the desert—and she saw, like ghosts, the shining of the stars.

She went outside to the night. She could see far more, now—from the line of cottonwoods by the creek bed to the black rolling of the hills toward the west beyond the house—and it seemed to Joan as though the walls of her mind were pushed back, also.

The stars which she had seen from the window were bright and cold, and still the honking of the wild geese dropped in hurried choruses or lonely single notes. The calling died off toward the north, and she waited through a silence as if for an answer from the earth to those voices from the sky. When it came it was from the cottonwoods, perhaps, but it appeared to be blowing from any corner of the compass—the wailing of a coyote. It quavered and rose.

The back door of the house closed, the screen jingling softly.

"Joan!" called Buck Daniels.

She could not answer at once. It was as though a hand were drawing her back from something beautiful and strange, back to the old, familiar commonplaces of the ranch.

"Joan!" he called again; and this time the sharp note of alarm made her turn quickly.

"Yes, dad," she answered.

He came half running toward her. He caught her by the arm.

"Why didn't you answer up when I called?" he demanded, panting. But he did not wait for an excuse. "Come back into the house," he went on. "Come back out of this darkness—this—"

She went back obediently beside him, but his hand did not loose her arm even while he was opening and closing the door. He did not even free her when they were back in the kitchen-living room of the house; but holding her at arm's length, he studied her as if her face were a page on which strange things might have been written in the last few moments.

"Why didn't you answer when I called you the first time?" he asked again. "Why

did you stop? What were you thinking about? Why did you go outside, Joan?"

She looked upon him with a frank wonder. Time and many sorrows had so seamed and weatherbeaten his face that every strong emotion looked like anger; but although his brows beetled and his eyes glared and his lips compressed, she knew that it was fear which had touched him.

Fear of what?

She had no time to ask or to answer, for he went on again:

"You go back to your book. You go right back and sit down there!"

He actually led her to the chair. He drew it closer to the lamp on the table.

"Now, honey," he said, when she was seated with the book in her lap, "ain't you comfortable here? Is the light where you want it?"

She smiled up to him and saw him turn away to his own place. And so a silence came into the room once more, but it was no longer like the silence which had preceded it, sleepy, dull, a long drawn period at the end of the day and the beginning of the night. There was a pulse in this quiet, and Joan began to grow aware of tingling nerves to the tips of her fingers.

Buck Daniels spoke again. "Joan—"

She turned toward him and smiled.

"Joan, you ain't happy?"

He was deeply moved by something, for she could see that he had locked his hands together as if to keep the fingers from showing any unsteadiness. And indeed there had been something most unusual about his manner of bringing her into the house and his hurried and broken sentences. It could not come from anything she had done.

While she mused over an answer she heard the rattling of wheels and the rapid beat of horses' hoofs on the road which passed their house not many rods away; and as the noise passed there was a sudden break of laughter—deep laughter of men, and the sweet, singing laughter of girls.

Every voice was like a song to Joan.

"Why do you say that?" she asked. "Why do you say I'm not happy?"

"I'm asking questions, Joan—I ain't stating facts. But tell me true. What you got on your mind, honey?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

He pointed at her a forefinger like the pointing of a gun.

She studied the worn face behind the hand with wonder and tenderness and pity.

"I seen you sitting over your book for fifteen minutes and never turning a page. Does that mean that you ain't got nothing on your mind, Joan?"

"I was just thinking," she said.

"Of what?"

"Of nothing," said Joan, truly feminine.

A flush of anger rose to his cheeks. And she marked the jump of his passions by the quick and hard gripping of his fingers.

"What made you get up and leave the room a while back?" he cross-examined her.

"It was a little warm in here," said Joan.

"Joan, it was so plumb chilly that you wondered if it wouldn't be a good idea to start a fire a while back, and you put on a coat instead."

It was an attack so direct that she changed color a little, and she could only avoid him by suddenly smiling straight in his eyes.

"As a matter of fact, I've forgotten why I wanted to leave the room. There was no reason."

Buck Daniels sighed.

"Have you started in to cover up things from me, Joan? I suppose such things have got to come to every man. The time comes along when his children don't trust him no more. But it's a mighty hard thing to face, honey!"

She was instantly driven to retreat.

"Listen!" she exclaimed.

And far away they heard another faint and dying burst of laughter down the road.

"I never go where other girls go," she said.

"You mean to dances and such like?"

"Yes."

"Wait till you've growed up, Joan."

"I'm eighteen, dad."

He blinked. "What's eighteen? Nothing but a baby!"

She said nothing, but looked him quietly in the face. It was a habit of hers, and the result was that he was invariably upset.

After a moment he could not meet her eyes. She herself looked down, for she was rather ashamed of her power over him.

"It's what your mother wanted, Joan. She wanted you to live quiet till you were growed up."

"But when will that be?"

"Maybe when you're twenty."

"Four years ago you said it would be when I was eighteen."

Instead of answering, he changed the subject.

"When you went outside what were you listening to?"

"The wild geese," she answered.

There was something in that answer which lifted him from his chair. He walked hastily across the room, pretended that he had gone to find his pipe, and came back frowning and idling with it.

"And when you heard 'em, Joan—when you heard 'em, what went on inside of you?"

It was her turn to be startled.

"How did you know that?" she breathed.

"Ah, honey," he said with an air of indescribable sadness, "I know more about you than you'd guess at. I know more about you than you know about yourself!"

"Then tell me why I went out to listen to the wild geese!"

He shook his head, and then, drawing his chair closer, he took her hand. She felt the rough, calloused palm stroking her soft skin.

"When folks take their thoughts and lock 'em up inside of their heads," he said gently, "them thoughts begin to get heavier and heavier. Too much silence is a sort of a poison, Joan. What did God give us tongues and throats for except to talk out the things that are bothering us? It won't do no good for me to tell you what's wrong. You got to find your own words and say it in your own way. And once you've said it, you'll find that you feel a pile easier. Try to tell me, Joan."

Behind that quiet voice she could feel the fear working. What that fear could be of was beyond her guessing. And after a while she said:

"Of course, the geese are nothing. But they're like milestones along a road; they point out a way, you know."

"A way to what—a way to what, Joan?"

"Dad, why are you so excited?"

"Excited? I ain't excited. Only—my God, who ever heard of wild geese as milestones? But go on, Joan."

"I mean that when I hear them crying in the middle of the sky and know that they're going north—"

"Well?" he murmured, as she paused.

"I don't know how it is, but pictures simply tumble into my mind."

"Of what, dear?"

"Of happiness—of a queer, sad happiness—a wonderful, lonely, free happiness."

He passed a hand hurriedly across his face. Then he peered at her again, anxiously, eagerly.

"Pictures of happiness? What sort of pictures, Joan?"

"Why—just what every one thinks about—of mountains, and the big trees, and the wind everywhere, and noises coming down it of all sorts of hunting creatures and creatures that are being hunted—"

"You think of all that?"

"Of course—and a thousand things more. Sometimes, when I listen, I feel as though I were trying to remember something that I'd known before. I don't know just what it is—but I begin to ache with longing, dad. My whole heart begins to ache, you know, to get north and find the place—"

"What place?"

"I don't exactly know. But if I found it I'd recognize it. A place where one would be wonderfully happy. That would be the end of the journey, until—"

"Until what?"

"But in the fall when they fly south—"

He had dropped his face upon his hand, but she was so deep in her thoughts that she did not see. For she was feeling her way forward through an undiscovered country in her mind.

"But in the fall when the days begin to grow shorter and the wild geese fly south, of course, they're pointing to much dif-

ferent things. One can't help thinking of warm winds, and great blue bayous, and reeds as high as one's head around the shores, and flowers even in winter."

"Joan, what put this into your head?"

She looked closely at him now, and she saw enough in his face to make her cry out:

"Why, dad! You're as pale as a ghost! Are you sick?"

"No, no!"

"Is there anything so very wrong in what I've said?"

"No—but—" He paused again, struggling with his explanation. "I once knew a man who found all those things in his head when the wild geese flew over."

"Oh," cried Joan, "tell me about him!"

But he drew himself back from her and exclaimed sharply:

"Never! Never ask me about him!"

"Oh, he was an enemy of yours?" asked Joan.

"He was my dearest friend?"

And to the utter wonder of Joan, she saw that tears were in the eyes of Buck Daniels. It was the more mysterious because, so far as she knew, he had no friends. And if he insisted that she lead the life of a hermit on the ranch, seeing no young company, meeting no one indeed, old or young, he led the same life himself, driving to town only for supplies and coming hastily home again.

She had thought of him as a recluse always. Indeed, how he could have met and managed to win the love of her mother she could never imagine. This was opening the book to an unexpected place. This was to find poetry instead of prose.

"But surely," said Joan, "you can tell me about him?"

"You?" cried Buck Daniels, starting from his chair beside her. "Not for the whole world. And—it's time for you to turn in, Joan. It's your bedtime. Run along."

She hesitated. There was a storm of questions lying locked behind her teeth. But she let them remain unspoken. When this man chose to be silent there was no winning him to speech.

And, besides, he had said enough to make her wish to be alone, so that she could turn all that had happened over and over in her mind. So, after that thoughtful instant, she kissed the bronzed cheek of the big man and went slowly up the stairway, which creaked and groaned beneath her footfalls.

Buck Daniels watched her going with an anguished face, and when she had disappeared he swiftly packed a pipe, lighted it, and went outside to walk up and down, up and down, for a long time. It was the beginning of the end, he felt. And he was filled with a cold and helpless sense of doom.

The tobacco had been long burned to an ash before he finally went inside again. Up the stairs he climbed and paused at the door of the girl.

"Joan!" he called very gently.

There was no answer, and, confident that she was asleep, he went on to his own room. But Joan only waited until his footfall had gone down the hall; then she slipped from her bed.

CHAPTER II.

WHERE THE LAW SLEPT.

TO Hal Springer and Rudy Nichols, the setting of the sun was most welcome, for when one has "broken ground" all day, and when the "ground" is hard quartz, fatigue becames a thing which bites clear to the soul. And, as a matter of fact, they could not have sustained the burden as well as they had done had it not been for certain gleaming little threads of rich yellow in the stone which told them that their labor now meant rest in the days to come.

When they laid aside their double jacks and their drills, however, they did not instantly set about preparing supper. They were too wise for that. For they first sat down on a stone and lighted their pipes. To be sure the twilight would make the cooking of supper more difficult, more unpleasant, but this small interval was refreshing their muscles, their very hearts. They did not even waste strength in words, but from the mountain side they looked out

with mild, tired eyes upon the progress of the shadows in the valleys.

They were of an age—perhaps forty-five—and although in body and feature they were as different as men could be, yet their expressions were so similar that they might have been taken for brothers. For each of them had spent twenty years wandering through the mountains, steering a course sighted between the ears of the burro which was driven ahead. They had chipped rocks with their hammers from Canada to Mexico.

Their minds were packed with all manner of information about strange trails and strange adventures, and strange as was their knowledge their hopes were even stranger. Each of them felt that he had rubbed elbows with huge fortunes time and again; each of them kept in the back of his mind precious information about spots where gold *had* to be; each of them had lived so long a solitary life that this association with two others seemed like existence in the midst of a roaring crowd.

The third partner, Harry Gloster, was absent hunting to stock their larder. And his absence was welcome. Not that they disliked him, but they preferred absolute solitude to any human company, and next to absolute solitude it was best to be near one of their own kind, calm, silent, gray as the stone, with eyes worn dull by searching for the spot where the rainbow touches the earth.

They began to hear, now, the sharp sound of shod hoofs striking the rocks below them, a noise which constantly climbed closer. They knew who it was. As a matter of fact, for the last two hours they had watched the rider working up the valley from far away, the distance diminishing his size although the clear mountain air let them see him distinctly enough.

They had watched him, from time to time, when they came out from the shaft to let the wind blow them cool. But neither had said a word to the other. As a matter of fact, they had not spoken a syllable since Gloster left them early that morning.

But as the noise of the horse came closer, Hal Springer went to the little shack, half cabin and half dugout, in which they bunked, and came back wearing his cartridge belt with the revolver dragging the right side of it far down over the hip.

His companion appeared to take not the slightest note of this preparation. He seemed to be only intent upon certain light effects and climbing shadows which were blurring the harsh outlines of a southern peak. But after a dozen puffs at his pipe, he also arose and went to the shack and returned similarly accoutered.

He had barely appeared when the stranger came into view. He had been obscured for some time by the sharp angle of the mountain side, now he was seen to be a fellow in the prime of life, wide shouldered, long-armed, and sitting as lightly in the saddle as if he had not been riding hard through the entire day. He dismounted, throwing his reins, while the hungry horse, daring not to move, reached in a guilty fashion after a blade of grass which was near its head.

"Hello, Hal," he said. "How's things?"

"Things are tolerable well, Macarthur," said Springer, and he took the hand of the other in a relaxed grip. It was plain that he was not nearly as well pleased to be seen as to see. "This is Rudy Nichols," he said. "Make you known to Joe Macarthur, Rudy."

The two shook hands, but Macarthur swung back to Springer. He wasted no time in preliminary remarks, but went directly to the point, which was what one would expect from his strong features and his steady, bright eyes.

"The damn vein pinched out on me," he said.

There was no response other than a puff of smoke from Springer's pipe.

"Looked like the real thing," went on Macarthur. "Then it faded. Never was worse fooled in my life. Showed the thing to old man Shaughnessy. He said the same thing."

"Too bad," drawled Springer, without interest.

"So your grubstake was throwed away," went on Macarthur.

Springer shrugged his shoulders. He appeared to have found with his glance the same mountain which had so fascinated

Nichols a short time before. He studied it as one stares at a picture of dubious merit, making a judgment.

"What I'm up here about," went on Macarthur, smoothly, taking a seat on a rock which enabled him to face Springer, and at the same time sifting some tobacco into a brown cigarette paper, "what I'm up here about is another grubstake."

The silence of Springer was as profound as the silence of the mountains around them.

"I've found the real thing at last," went on Macarthur, as he twisted and licked his cigarette paper. He lighted it and turned his head to watch the match fall. "If I told you all the facts about where and what it was, you'd pack up your things and leave this here hole in the ground and come along with me."

"Maybe," said Springer.

"It's rich!" cried Macarthur with a contagious enthusiasm. "All you got to do is to give the rock one clip with a hammer and you see enough to start you dancing!"

"I've done my dancing," drawled Springer.

"Hal," said Macarthur, leaning forward and speaking in the soft voice of persuasion, "you may have used up a lot of hope on me since that last job didn't pan out, but take this from me: you're a fool if you don't try another try.

"I could of got backing a good many places with a specimen like this to show. But I wanted you to get your money back —and more too. So I come clear up here instead of showing this here ore to Milligan or to one of them other rich gents that ain't got the guts to gamble on nothing but a sure thing. Take a look!"

He tossed a little fragment of rock to Springer.

"Take a look at your hoss," said Springer.

Macarthur turned. The pony, straying away after a tempting bunch of grass, had been held back by the reins catching on a projecting rock. A strong jerk of the head had broken the head band and allowed the bridle to slip down.

"The darned old fool!" exclaimed Macarthur. "But he'll stand without no bridle at all. What d'you think of that sample, Hal?"

"For a sample," murmured Springer, "it looks like something."

And he tossed it back.

The other pocketed the specimen in silence. His jaw had thrust out and his scowl was black.

"That means you don't give a damn about making your fortune?" he asked.

There was another depressing interval of silence.

"Hal," said Macarthur at last, "don't you believe me?"

There was another little interval of dragging pause in which Nichols discovered something of interest some distance down the slope and rose and sauntered down.

"I don't believe in you," answered Springer at last, with all the deliberation of a matured judgment. "When I grubstaked you, I was drunk. You got me when I was in town drunk, and you worked on me until I handed over enough money for you to use as a grubstake, as you called it. That made us come up to this job short of everything that we needed."

Macarthur bit his lip.

"Look at the sample, though," he pleaded, fighting down his passion.

"Samples ain't hard to get. Some buy 'em, and some borrow 'em."

Macarthur arose to his feet. It was too direct an affront.

"Springer," he said, "what d'you mean by that?"

"I mean just this," said the other, spelling out the words on his fingers, "I've looked you up, and what I've heard would of made a dog sick. You ain't no good, Macarthur. You skinned me out of one neat little bunch of money. You won't skin me out of another. That's the straight of it. I'm through with your kind. I've heard how you—"

He stopped. Something had happened in Macarthur like a silent explosion. His lips were trembling and his lean face seemed to have swollen.

"You damned old fool!" he whispered.

"Look here—" began Springer, but instead of finishing his sentence, with a gasp

which let the pipe fall from between his teeth he reached for his gun.

It glided out of the scabbard with an ease which told of a skill which had at one time, perhaps, been great.

But fast as his movement was, it was like standing still compared with the flying hand of Macarthur. His gun spoke before the muzzle of Springer's revolver was clear of the leather, and the miner, with a cough, twisted around and slumped over to one side. There was a yell from Rudy Nichols.

"You damned cutthroat!" he was screaming, his voice thrown into a high falsetto by his emotion, and he ran forward, pumping away with his revolver. Not a bullet hummed close to the mark. His aim was so wild that Macarthur raised his own weapon with the calm precision of one firing at a target, and Nichols pitched on his face while his gun rolled and clattered down the slope.

Macarthur waited until the echoes died down. He faced his horse, which had raised its head and was regarding the motionless bodies with a mild interest.

"This is hell," breathed Macarthur. "I didn't mean—"

However, the thing was done, and since it was accomplished only a fool would let a twinge of conscience drive him away before he had reaped the harvest of a crime. He went to the shack, searched it thoroughly, and found a little cash, a ten pound sack of gold which was a prize almost worth the shooting, he decided, and finally he took from the wall a bridle with which to replace his own broken one. In five minutes he was riding down the mountain again.

He paused at the first crossing of the river in the valley. He tied a heavy rock to his bridle and threw it in. After that, how was any human being to tell that he had been there? For not a soul in the world knew to what destination he had been riding that day and certainly the keenest eyes in the world could never trace him over the rocks on which he had been riding.

But before he reached that river, Harry Gloster returned to the mine and he returned leading his horse, which was loaded down with game. He was a poor shot. Practice had never been able to help the skill of the big fellow. But luck had been with him twenty times this day. It had seemed that he could not miss.

He came back, however, to the black and silent cabin, and when he lighted the lantern he carried it out and found the two dead men lying as they had fallen. The lantern shuddered in his hand. First he hurried back to the cabin.

The motive for the double killing was patent at once. For the gold was gone. He went back and carried the dead men to the same spot. And when they lay on their backs with the dirt brushed from their faces, they were wonderfully unchanged from the two he had left that morning.

They must be buried. And he buried them in miner's fashion. He took them to the old shaft which they had begun to dig until the false vein disappeared. At the mouth of the hole he sank a drill a few inches, wielding a double jack with one hand and raining the blows as if he were swinging a carpenter's hammer, for he was a giant of strength. Then he put in his stick of powder, lighted the fuse, and watched the explosion roll twenty tons of stone across the entrance.

Now for the ride to town! He saddled his horse, the only horse of the three which they pastured near the mine which was capable of bearing his weight. It was not until the saddle was in place that the other thought came to him. Suppose that he rode into town and told them what he had found. They would come pouring out to see the site of the tragedy.

But no sooner were they there than they would begin to ask questions, and those questions would be prompted by the discovery that the mine was paying in rich ore. A rich mine owned by three partners of whom two are suddenly and sadly killed! How fortunate, how extremely fortunate for the third member of the group!

It came sickeningly home to him. He was new to that land. No one knew him. No one would vouch for him. Strangers would compose the jury that tried him. A

strange judge would advise them. A furious prosecutor would pour forth his eloquence about this dastardly crime—the murder of two honest, old prospectors!

Sweat stood upon his forehead. Sweat poured out at his armpits. And every mile that he traveled gave him time for thoughts. The beat of the hoofs of his horse turned into words, and they were the words of the charge of the judge to the jury pointing out all the damning evidence and, in summing up, showing that if such a crime went unpunished it would encourage other men to destroy their partners when a mine began to pay. For how simple was it, in the lonely mountains, to destroy a man, and how easy it was to put the blame upon an unknown stranger and say that one had been out hunting that day!

He went to the town, indeed, but he did not ride into the center of it. Instead, he left his horse at the outskirts, saddle and all. There he paused a moment to rub the nose of the honest mustang and murmur: "They'll find you, old timer. They'll give you some chuck. I know you're hungry as sin!" Then he went on.

He sneaked through the village. He came to the railroad station, and half an hour later he was aboard a freight train and bound for parts farther south.

When the rattling wheels had spun beneath the train for two hours, he dropped off at a place where it had stopped for water. For he must leave a broken trail behind him, he decided, and he was already far, far away from the place of the double murder.

He cut across the country. In the gray of the dawn when day could hardly have been said to have begun he came to a ranch house. There, in the barn, he found saddle and bridle. In the corral were a dozen horses.

He picked the stoutest, without regard for lines which might indicate speed, for his first requirement of a horse was the strength to bear up his unusual bulk. On the back of this animal he threw the saddle, lowered the bars, led the horse out, and then rode south, south at a steady jog. It would not do to use too much early speed, for the road was long which led across the desert. But somewhere ahead of him was Mexico, and there, unless men lied, the law sometimes slept.

CHAPTER III.

THE CLENCHED FIST.

THERE was a fluster in the kitchen of the hotel. The heart of Mary, the waitress, chambermaid and occasionally clerk in the General Merchandise Store, was full. She had to talk. She would have talked to the wall had not the Chinese cook been there.

"He's about that tall," said Mary, reaching high above her head. "He's about that broad. Why, he'd fill that door plumb full. And he's all man, Wu. There he goes now! He's finished washing up and he's going around in front. Look quick through the window—"

But Wu, with a grunt which might have been directed either at the frying steak or at her remark, turned his narrow back upon her and reached for the salt. One glance showed Mary that her confidant was a thing of stone.

So she kneeled on the chair and poured her heart through the window toward the big man. He was not quite as large as she had made him out, but he was big enough. And he was one of those men who carry about them such an air of conscious strength, such a high headed and frank eyed good nature, that they appear larger than they are.

He carried his hat in his hand, which showed all of a handsome, sunbrowned face. He had taken off his bandanna, also, and opened his shirt at the throat to the evening air. His whole manner was one of utter carelessness, and Mary, when she had peered until he was out of sight, sat down suddenly in the chair with her head thrown back and a foolish little smile upon her lips.

As for Harry Gloster, he paused at the front of the building to laugh at two sweating boys who, in the middle of a great dust cloud, were attempting to drive back a pig which had broken through the fence on the farther side of the street. Then he en-

tered the hotel and went into the dining room.

There was only one other present, and this was a pleasant companion. He was one of those men who show age in the face and not in the body. His shoulders were as wide, his chest as high arched, the carriage of his head as noble as that of any athletic youth.

But his hair was almost a silver-gray and his face was broken and haggard with time and trouble. If his face alone were noted he looked all of sixty. But taking his erect and strong body into consideration, one reduced the age to forty-five. And that must have come close to the truth.

Harry Gloster waved a hand in greeting and sat down beside the other.

"Riding through or living here?" he asked.

"Riding through," answered the older man. "You?"

"Just blowing north," said Harry Gloster.

"So am I," said the other. "In a rush, as a matter of fact. We might ride on together to-morrow."

Harry Gloster eyed him askance.

"I may be starting in a little while—may not wait for morning," he parried.

He could have sworn that the other smiled, although very faintly. And Gloster leaned suddenly forward and looked his companion squarely in the eyes.

"What's on your mind?" he asked sharply.

The older man hesitated an instant and then laughed. He added, speaking softly: "It's all right, son. But there's no red dirt of that color south of the town. You're just off the Pebbleford trail. You're heading south." The twinkle in his eyes focused to a gleam. "You're for the Rio Grande—*pronto!*"

He spoke just in time to save the heart of Mary from complete wreckage, for at this moment she came in, staggering under the weight of a great tray of food and dishes, yet with her glance fastened on the face of Harry Gloster—who gave her not a look.

To be sure, he had not changed color at the last words of his tablemate; he even managed to maintain a smile, but the big muscles at the base of his jaw were bulging a little and he stared straight before him. The moment Mary was gone again, however, with a last languishing glance from the door to the kitchen, Gloster touched the arm of the other.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"Nothing," said the older man. "Nothing, except that I don't like to be bluffed." He made a gesture of perfect openness with a bandaged right hand. "You have nothing to fear from me," he added quietly.

At this Harry Gloster grew a little pale.

"What do you know?" he said.

"If I were sheriff," said the other, "I'd lock you up on suspicion and hold you until I'd had a look at your back trail. But I'm not sheriff—not by a considerable distance!"

"Then that's finished?"

"It is!"

They exchanged eloquent glances, and Harry Gloster drew a great breath of relief. Before he could speak again a third man entered the room, stopped short as his glance fell upon Gloster's companion, and then advanced again, slowly, with an indescribable change in his manner and step which told that he was facing danger. As for the man beside Gloster, he, too, had altered, sitting a little straighter in his chair, and with an outthrust of his lower jaw.

Yet he said calmly enough: "Hello, Joe."

"Howdy," nodded the other. "Kind of far south for you, Lee, ain't it?"

"A little far south," answered Lee, while the other drew back a chair with his left hand and sat down slowly, gingerly, never taking his eyes from Lee. He was one of those long legged, long armed men whose weight is condensed almost entirely around herculean shoulders.

He was handsome, in a way, but his features were all overshadowed, as one might say, by the very shadow of his physical strength. It showed in the straight line of his compressed mouth, in the forward jutting of his head, and most significantly in a cruel flare of the nostrils.

"Yes," went on Lee as calmly as before, "I'm a little farther south than usual. I'm on a trail. Maybe you could give me a few pointers, Joe."

Joe grinned, and there was no mirth in his smile.

"Sure," he said dryly. "Ain't it nacheral for me to do anything for you that I could?"

Here Mary came to get the order of the newcomer. He snapped a request for ham and eggs at her without moving his eyes from Lee.

"I'm looking for a woman," said Lee, continuing as soon as the girl had left the room.

"We all are," said Joe, grinning again.

"Her name," said Lee, "is Kate Cumberland. That is, it used to be. She's the widow of Dan Barry."

"Never heard of her or him," said Joe.

"Or of Jim Silent?" asked Lee, and it seemed to Harry Gloster that there was a tremor of seriousness in the manner of the speaker.

"Silent? Nope."

"Or you?" asked Lee, glancing earnestly at Gloster.

"Never heard of him. Who was he?"

"I have no luck," said Lee, deep in gloom, and avoiding the direct question. "That trail has gone out!"

The comment of Joe was a grin of cruel disinterest. And Harry Gloster said kindly: "Old friends of yours?"

"Dan Barry—an old friend?" muttered Lee as much to himself as to the others. "I don't know." He sighed and looked across the room with blank eyes. "God knows what he was to me or to any other human being." And he added, sadly: "He was a man I wronged, and he was a man who gave me my life when he had it like that—to take if he wanted it—"

He raised his hand and closed it as though he were crushing an invisible something against his palm.

"Well," said Joe with sinister meaning, "gents like that come few and far between, eh?"

"They do," answered Lee. "There are some folks that hold a small grudge to the end of time. I've met men like that." The meaning could not be misunderstood.

And suddenly Joe turned white. It was not hard to see that a great emotion had been working in him ever since he entered the room. And now it leaped up from his heart and mastered him.

His head lowered and thrust out a bit more than usual; he pushed back his chair somewhat from the table so as to give his knees clearance for quick action. And his right hand dropped patently close to his hip.

"You've met one of them men in me, Haines," he said, breathing hard, and yet growing whiter and whiter as the passion mounted. "I've been thinking and thinking about—you and me. And I'm tolerable glad that we've met up. Tolerable glad!"

And, indeed, the battle lust shook him like a leaf.

Harry Gloster eyed them shrewdly. He had been among fighting men all his life. They were a sort of language which he could read with a perfect fluency.

But as he looked from one to the other of these two he could not tell which was the more formidable. There was more nervous energy in Joe, but in the man who had just been called Haines there was a calm reserve of strength which might be employed in the crisis. He was older, to be sure, but he was not yet old enough to be slow.

There was one determining factor which Gloster could see, but which Joe could not. The right hand of Haines had been kept scrupulously out of sight beneath the table from the moment Joe entered. It had appeared to Harry at first that this might be from fear lest the other should note his infirmity and take advantage of it to fly at his throat.

But now that the actual danger of battle had become almost unavoidable, there might be another reason which induced Haines to conceal his wound—and that was an indomitable pride which kept him from taking advantage of a weakness to put off a danger. And, in fact, he was now meeting the last outburst of Joe with a calm smile of scorn.

Yet, certainly, he was helpless. The four fingers of his right hand were bound together with one bandage. He could not possibly use a gun under such a handicap unless he were ambidextrous—and on his left side he wore no gun!

To reach across to his right hip would be impossible—opposite him there was a

man quivering with hate and with murder in his face. At the first suspicious move he would strike and his stroke would be as devastating as a lightning flash.

"Wait a minute!" cried Gloster. "Wait a minute, will you? My friend here has a bad hand—he can't—"

"You carry people along to beg off for you?" sneered Joe.

"I've never met this man before," said Haines slowly. "And I need no advice or help. When I fight a rat, I fight alone!"

It came home to Harry Gloster with a sickening surety. It was simply the suicide of a man tired of life and preferring to die by the hand of another rather than his own. He watched the lip of Joe curl; he saw him take a short breath, as if he were drinking the insult to the last drop, and then there was a convulsive movement of his right arm. The elbow jerked back and up and the big revolver came spinning out of its holster.

Lee Haines had not stirred; indeed, the smile with which he had uttered his last remark was still on his lips. But Harry Gloster had begun to move the split part of a second before the man across the table.

It was a long distance, but the arm of Gloster was a long arm. One foot planted behind him braced his weight. His fist shot across the table with all his bulk in motion behind it. His hip struck the table, tilted it, sent the crockery spilling and crashing to the floor. But before the first cup fell, his fist cracked on the point of the aggressor's jaw.

Had it landed solidly, it would have knocked Joe half the length of the room. But as it was, he flinched back at the last instant, seeing the flying danger from the corner of his eye. So the blow merely grazed the bone and partly stunned him for the fraction of a minute.

He staggered up from his chair and back a step. The revolver dropped down to the tips of his unnerved fingers and hung there by the trigger guard. The very curse which he uttered was blurred and half spoken.

"Keep out of this!" commanded Haines, and reached for the shoulder of his table companion. His grip was strong, but his fingers slipped from a mass of contracted muscles. He might as well have laid an arresting hand on the flank of an avalanche.

Harry Gloster went over the table and landed first with his fist on the face of Joe, and secondly, with his feet on the floor. The half numbed fingers of Joe were gathering the revolver again.

The blow landed in the nick of time and it ended the fight, whirling him about and pitching him into the wall with a force that jarred the room. He slumped loosely back upon the floor.

Mary, brought by the uproar to the door of the kitchen, screamed and ran back, and Wu raised a shrill chattering. Lee Haines was already kneeling beside the fallen man, whom he turned on his back.

"Not even a broken jaw," he said. "He must be made of India rubber." He arose and faced Gloster, and laid his bandaged hand on the shoulder of the other. His calm was amazing to Harry Gloster.

"That was fast work," Haines said, "and it saved me from being filled full of lead, which is bad enough, or begging off, which is worse. But if you're headed for the Rio Grande, don't let this hold you back. And if you come back again, don't come back this way. He's bad medicine, you understand?"

"I've never side-stepped a man yet," Harry Gloster replied, shaking his head.

"You're not too old to form a good habit," Haines rejoined. He scanned the magnificent body of Gloster, and last of all his glance dwelt on the hands. His own fingers, and those of Joe, lying unconscious on the floor, were long, slender, bony—intended for movements of electric speed. But the fingers of Harry Gloster were square-tipped, built for crushing power. "No," he continued, "keep away from him and you'll have better luck. And start moving now!"

There was such a solemn assurance in his voice that it was impossible for Harry Gloster to answer. He looked down again to the long arms of Joe, sprawled across the floor, and to the long fingered, sun blackened hands. And a shudder of instinctive dread passed through Gloster. He turned to speak again to Lee Haines, to learn something of the history and of the accomplish-

ments of this man—of his full name—but Haines was already moving swiftly through the door.

CHAPTER IV.

MOON MAD.

THE ranch house in which Buck Daniels and Joan lived was not old, but the parching sun of a few summers had drawn the life from the wood and warped it loose, and a score of wild sandstorms had battered and twisted it. So that a voice sounded from corner to corner of the building and a footfall started small murmurs squeaking across the house.

But when Joan arose from her bed it was like the rising of a shadow; there was not even a whispering of the covers as they were laid back. And so gingerly did she thrust her weight to the floor that it gave not the slightest sound back to her. And to tell how great a need there was for caution, at that moment Buck Daniels turned in his bed and there was a grinding of the springs as plainly audible as if it had been in Joan's own apartment.

So, for a moment, she stood quietly, thinking and planning and weighing chances, with a hand pressing a hollow into her cheek. And perhaps timidity would have conquered now as it had conquered with her before had it not been that her window opened to the east and, looking through it across the night, she saw what seemed the rising of a great fire along the black edges of the eastern mountains.

But no forest fire could spread so rapidly, and no forest fire at such a distance could throw such a glow into the upper sky. For that matter, as she very well knew, there were no trees on the mountains—nothing but a wretched scattering of sunburned brush and spine covered cactus.

Presently an orange rim pushed up, and then grew into a great half circle which framed the ragged heads of three peaks. And then the moon went up until it stood all exposed, resting only on its lower edge upon the very tip of the highest peak. It was pulled out to the sides like puffed cheeks —a blunted ellipse—and it began to gild with gold the white dunes of the desert and at the same time it seemed to pour the dark over the mountains and made them visible with blackness against the eastern sky.

And the light fell fairly through the window upon Joan so that the white of her nightgown, when she looked down, had been changed to a softly shimmering rich color. Or so it seemed to her excited fancy.

She turned her head. She could see the familiar bureau in the corner and the sheen of the glass above it. And yonder was the chair, and there was the table beside her bed, with a misshapen heap of books upon it.

A glittering point of light rested on the knob of her door; she could almost distinguish the worn and pulpy fabric of the matting upon her floor. And all the dreary sense of poverty and dullness, all the weight of monotonous years in which every day was like its fellow, rolled suddenly upon Joan and made a sigh swell in her throat.

She could not stay. Something was whipping her out. The moon was lifting momently high and higher up the sky. And now it lost all sense of weight. It was floating on nothingness and pouring down bright and brighter light.

At least, it gave her light enough for dressing. And when she was dressed—and every move now swift and noiseless—she drifted across the room to the bureau and picked up the hand mirror. When she had brought it back before the window she had to turn it to a particular angle before she could see herself.

Surely it seemed that such a change as she felt in herself must show in the face, but she found no alteration. They were the same girl features. Only her eyes were a little wider and more glistening with eagerness. And something was lacking which she felt in her heart.

She took the long, soft, thick masses of her hair, but instead of twining it swiftly into the usual braids, she began to work it high on her head. It required an infinite number of pins before it would hold, but when she looked again, Joan caught her breath.

Instinct had told her surely what to do.

The change was worked and she felt that she had stepped away from an old self and into a new. She was instantly far older.

She threw the mirror on the bed and crossed to the door. A whole long minute was needed for the turning of that treacherous knob with all its squeaks. But finally the lock clicked back as softly as if muffled in cotton. She stepped into the hall, closed the door with the same caution, and then went on to the stairs.

They were the chief trial. She had never gone either up or down them before without making noise enough to arouse a sleeping regiment. But now there was a wonderful difference. She had grown lighter, so it seemed, and in her very feet there was a guiding intelligence. Without a sound she passed to the bottom and stood in the main downstairs room with a beating heart of triumph.

But still she was not outside. The old atmosphere still clung around her. The odor of Buck Daniels's last pipe still hovered in the air, suffocatingly thick and sweet, and that worn and splintered floor which she had scrubbed so often was full of voices.

They did not waken under her now. That strange lightness of foot was still hers. And all at once it seemed to Joan that all these dead things were her inanimate allies, helping her toward freedom. But where should she go even when she was outside? The night would tell her that. That outer night would lead her!

She was under the stars at last. In the flooding moonshine they were withdrawn to small points of light, for the sky was thick with a haze of radiance. It was all new to her. She had seen it before, no doubt. But now she was looking with new eyes, and the voices of a band of wild geese, dropping in chilly harmony about her, were like so many words, each a message in a foreign tongue and yet with a meaning to be half guessed.

She went out to the barn, found her saddle in the dark, and passed on to the corral. There were a half dozen horses there, but she knew them all. Their silhouettes were as familiar as human faces, although they were crowded in a farther corner.

They snorted and broke apart when she approached them, but when she called to them they halted again. They stood shaking their heads up and down as horses do when instinct tells them that all men are terrible and reason tells them that one man, at least, is kind.

She called again, very softly so that not even the keenest ear could hear her from the house, and the horses came slowly toward her, still putting back their ears and making a pretense of biting at one another, as if ashamed of any but compulsory obedience. They gathered in a thick little semicircle before her, their eyes as bright as metal, for the moon was in them.

She had a touch and a word for each of them, as though she needed to give an excuse for her choice. Pinto was lame, and Bob White was tired after a day's gallop, and Jack had done his share this week, and poor old Mike and Brownie would never do for such work as she had in mind.

"Because where I'm going I don't know—and when I'll come back I don't know—but I think it will be a longer way than I've ever ridden before. So you're the one for me, Peter, dear!"

She rubbed the nose of a shining bay and he stood like a rock while she drew the saddle onto his back, and like a well mannered horse refrained from puffing out his body when she drew the cinches taut. And when the bit, that dread of range horses, appeared under his nose, he opened his teeth for it and pricked his ears as she slipped the headband over them.

One and all, they followed her to the gate. And when she opened it and led Peter out, they crowded against the bars and whinnied softly after her so that she turned her head anxiously toward the house.

Such small sounds, however, could surely never reach the ears of Buck Daniels. But when she swung into the saddle she kept the high spirits of Peter in check and made him walk the first hundred yards. It was not until she was fairly assured that the distance and the soft going would muffle the beating of his hoofs that she loosed the reins, and Peter sprang away at full speed.

Oh, the wind of that wild gallop in her face, and the fences pouring past her as she rode south, and south! It seemed to Joan for a while that this was all she wanted;

when she jumped Peter over a gate and, glancing up, saw the stars blurred above her, she was doubly sure that this was goal enough for her journey.

After all, even Peter, in spite of slender legs made for speed and a great heart of courage, could not race all the night, and when she drew him to a walk, she heard them again—the far-off calling of the wild geese flying north. She stopped the good horse and listened. There was the sound of his breathing, and the faint squeaking of leather as his heaving sides pressed against the cinches; but the crying of the wild geese was very clear overhead, and the strange melancholy and the strange restlessness grew stronger than ever.

She thought back to her talk with Buck Daniels. After all, what she had been able to explain to him had been very little of what was big in her heart. It seemed to her that if her mother, who had died ten years before, had been living now it would have been easier to tell her what she meant.

But even of that she was in doubt. The more clearly she recalled the soft blue eyes and the gentle face of that mother the more certain she was that there would have been no confidant.

No, even her horse knew more. A wedge of the geese streamed black across the face of the moon, and Peter looked up to them with pricking ears. What was going on inside that wise head of his? She felt that she would have given a treasure to know.

There was a rattle of single-trees not far away, and a swift drumming of hoofs. The road was not far behind her, and on this night she wished to be far from roads. The deeper the wilderness into which she could pass, the better.

So she sent Peter away at that matchless gallop, jumped another fence, and was on the very verge of a swale which would shut out all sound from the road when she heard what had thrilled her once before that evening—the high, light laughter of a girl. It was almost inaudible, but even through the distance it trailed like a hand across her heart.

She stopped Peter with a gasping word and listened. There it came again, beautiful as music over water, and wading, fading until it went out. Something had unlocked the soul of that unknown girl and let the laughter out. But the door was still closed in Joan. Indeed, could it ever be opened?

She looked down the hollow to the twisting line of cottonwoods which ran near the dry creek. And beyond the tree tops rolled the moon-whitened dunes, crisply cut against the far shadow of the mountains. Once more the shower of melodious dissonance came dropping from the wild geese in the heart of the sky, and for a strange instant it almost seemed to Joan that the laughter of the girl was falling again, out of the deep bosom of the heavens.

Somewhere in that great world there was a secret of happiness. And those voices which she had heard traveling down the road, might not they be all bound toward it? She turned Peter and headed him back at a gallop again.

CHAPTER V.

THE VENTURESOME MOTH.

SHE had ridden three miles to the west when she came suddenly on the place, for as Peter carried her over the top of a dune, she saw the schoolhouse below her with light pouring out of every open window. There were dozens of horses and buckboards tethered near the building and as dance started at this moment, she heard not only the music, but even the whisper of the many feet across the floor—so plainly did sound travel through the desert night!

It acted strangely upon Joan. She knew that this was the place she sought. She knew it as plainly as if a door had closed upon her and shut her into the midst of happiness. And yet at the same time she was frightened. She could not have kept away from the place any more than if she had been a moth fluttering near a flame, and yet she felt a dread as of fire itself.

She skirted to the side until she reached a little forest of cactus and scrub cedar tall enough to conceal her horse. There she left Peter with the reins thrown and a reassuring pat on his nose. Starting on again,

she became as cautious as when she had stolen about in the ranch house this night in dread of waking Buck Daniels. And there was need of care, for here and there about the schoolhouse couples were strolling who had danced their fill for the time being, and every couple was a man and a woman.

The heart of Joan beat strangely as she watched them. They walked very near to each other. Their heads were close together. They paused often and, raising their faces in unison, looked up to the moon. It had floated well up in the heavens, now, and it looked like a buckler of priceless sliver. Around it was spread a halo of color—a rainbow of fantastic delicacy.

Indeed, it was worth looking at, that moon. But Joan, crouched behind a rock and watching with the intentness of a wild cat, studied the faces of two who paused just before her to stare at the sky, and certainly it appeared to her that she had never seen a more foolish expression. Their lips were parted a little and their hands were clasped—he a gaunt fellow, bowed and old with labor even at thirty years, and she big-handed from work and her face parched and thin from the lack of happiness.

What were they murmuring?

"I love you, Margie, dear.

"Oh, Bill—I love you, too!"

They turned away, slowly, and escaped another pair that was coming up.

"Love!" murmured Joan to herself with magnificent scorn. "What stupid things they are?"

She tried to tell herself that she was losing all desire to be inside that schoolroom with its music and its dancers, and yet something held her with a small, sure thread.

Here was another couple. At least they were not gaping at the moon. The girl was so pretty that it made Joan smile with pleasure to see her. And then with a piercing eye she examined the dress of her. There was a peculiar magic in it. It was only a simple pink frock, but it fluffed around the body of the girl like a clinging bit of sun-tinted cloud.

One half expected to look through the mist to the outline of the graceful body. And yet there was nothing immodest.

The man, too, was quite different from that other of the crooked shoulders and the wan face. He was a handsome fellow, arrowy straight, with a pair of level black brows and keen eyes beneath them.

"He'll tell her that he loves her," said Joan to herself. "I hope he does! And what will she do then?"

But their conversation was not at all what she had wished.

"We've gone about far enough," said the girl, coming to a halt and facing her companion so that her profile came into line with the watchful eyes of Joan. "Now, what do you want to say to me?"

"Just what you know I'm going to say!" exclaimed the man.

"Haven't the least idea."

"You have, though. You've broken your promise again!"

"What promise?"

"That you'd stop flirting."

"John Gainor! Besides—I don't know what you mean."

"You *do*, though."

"Will you explain?"

"There's Chick Montague been following you all evening like your shadow. You danced with him twice. And he looked plumb foolish while he was dancing!"

"Are you jealous again?"

"Jealous? Of course not! I just want to keep you from being talked about."

"Don't worry about me."

"I say, Nell, you got to stop!"

"What'll make me? When I'm doing nothing wrong—"

"D'you call it nothing wrong when you make every man you dance with figure that you're tired of me and mighty glad that you've rid of me for a while, at least?"

"I've never said that in my life."

"Not in so many words. But words ain't the only things that count. There's a way you got of looking down and looking up sudden and bright at a gent that knock's 'em flat—and you know it as well as I do. And then you've got a way of smiling at them sort of sad and sweet as if there was something you'd like to tell 'em, if you only could!"

"John, you talk as if I were a—a—I'm not going to say another word to you tonight."

"Then I'll take you home now."

"I won't go a step! I'm having the best time in my life—and you want me to give it up!"

"Nell!"

"Oh!" cried Nell, stamping, "you make me so—"

Suddenly Gainor drew himself up. And Joan trembled with excitement. She wanted to go out and take his arm and say: "Oh, don't speak too quickly! She's meant to do no wrong!"

But, of course, she could only stay where she was and shiver with apprehension as Gainor said coldly: "If you're tired of me, I ain't going to bother you no more, Nell. But we got to have a show-down right here and now!"

What would Nell do now, Joan wondered. What defiance would spring out of her pride? But she was astonished to see Nell throw out her hands in an appealing gesture.

"You're trying to break my heart!" she sobbed.

"Oh, Nell," cried the man softly. "Oh, honey, I'd go through fire to make you happy. Don't you know that?"

And, quite regardless of whoever might be looking, he caught Nell in his arms. It was such an unexpected ending to the little drama that Joan caught her breath, smiling and nodding in sympathy. She was so glad the breach was healed that she wanted to run out and shake their hands and tell them how happy she was.

"Stop crying, dear," Gainor was saying. "I'm a brute the way I been talking to you. I'd like to get down on my knees and beg your pardon. Please stop crying, Nell, and I'll never talk about flirting again!"

And indeed the whole body of Nell was shaken and quivering. But it was not with sobs. To the utter amazement of Joan, straight toward whom the face of the girl was turned, Nell was laughing, impudently, silently, with her face crushed close to the shoulder of her lover.

"But folks will see us!" Gainor muttered, drawing back.

Nell buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, Nell," groaned the man, "I'll never forgive myself! Will you?"

He thought she was still crying, no doubt. But Joan, shocked and thunderstruck, knew well enough that she was merely hiding the last of her laughter.

Oh, shameless woman, she thought. And her anger arose. Oh, wretched, guileful woman! How she shamed all her sex!

And now they were walking off affectionately arm in arm with the girl looking sadly up at Gainor and saying: "I only want you to be kind to me, John. Just a little kind to me!"

"Kind to you!" Gainor replied, his voice a great tremor of enthusiasm. "Nell, I'll work for you until my hands are raw. I'll make you happy if I have to—"

His voice faded in the distance. So to the very end Nell had tricked him, using the tears which laughter had brought to her eyes to subdue him. He should be warned, thought Joan; he should certainly be warned about the vixen.

She mused about how it might be done until she was astonished to find herself laughing softly. She checked that laughter at once, only to have it break out again.

"After all," Joan murmured to herself, "she was wonderful! I wonder if any other woman in all the world could do that to a man?"

In the meantime, the music inside the school had swung into the air of a Spanish waltz song whose words she had heard and learned from a cowpuncher who had once worked for Buck Daniels. And the lilt of it entered her blood, irresistibly. She found her hand stirring in the rhythm. Her very pulse was beating to it. It became vitally necessary to her to look once inside that room at the dancers.

She stole around to the farther side of the school. There she found that the way was easy, for the foundation had been laid close to a ragged mass of black rocks. Up these she climbed and at the top found herself at the level of a window not more than three feet away. And by shifting her head from side to side she could survey the whole room.

But she did not care to shift it, for the

instant her glance passed across the room it fell upon the form of a man like a lion compared with the best of all the others—a big, wide shouldered fellow who overflowed the chair he sat on, with a head covered with curling tawny hair thrown back to rest against the wall, and a face half stern and half handsome, and wholly careless of all that went on around him.

Two youngsters of sixteen or seventeen went spinning by in double time, through the mazes of a new dance, and the big man of the tawny hair so far roused himself as to lounge forward in his chair and clap his hands in the swift time of their shuffling feet. But then he leaned back again and ran his eyes negligently over the maze of faces before him as if he found nothing worth a particular examination.

Finally he arose, threw back his shoulders, and stretched himself a little—he loomed a whole head taller than the crowd—and left the hall. Now she could look about to see who else was there. But when she looked she found that she was seeing nothing on every side of her but that handsome, bronzed face and the head of tawny hair. And fear, too, had come to her, so that she felt a great desire to be back home and in her bed with the covers drawn tightly around her neck.

What it was she feared she could not tell. But it was something like a child's dread of the lonely dark—filled with unseen faces, and hands that might seize one by surprise, and great voices that might ring at one's ear.

She stole back down the rock. All at once it seemed to her that she had been incredibly bold in adventuring as she had done.

And if Buck Daniels should ever know—

She hurried around the school again. She slipped away into the tangle of cedar and cactus until she reached Peter again, and as he whinnied a welcome no louder than a whisper, she threw her arms around his honest head and drew it close to her.

"Oh, Peter," she murmured, "I've seen such strange things, and I've heard such strange things. Take me home as fast as you can."

But when she had mounted to the saddle, trembling with weakness and fear and haste, her courage returned. For here was Peter under her, and in case of danger she could launch away on his back like an arrow from the string. One dance had ended; another dance was beginning. But its music was nothing. For still the words and the rhythm of the Spanish waltz rang through her head, and, tilting up her face, she began to sing them.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GENTLE FLAME.

IT made no difference that she did not understand the words; that did not lessen her enjoyment of the rhythm.

> "Que viva la rumba;
> Que viva, que viva placer;
> Que vivan las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
> Y guapas que saben querer!"

She ended with laughter in her throat.

"Hello!" called a man's voice, approaching the thicket. "Who's yonder?"

Joan gathered the reins with a jerk that tensed Peter for a start. But instead of fleeing at once she looked back and saw the figure of a big man striding across the clearing.

Between the heads of two scrub cedars she could see him, and now he crossed a shaft of light which spilled out from a window, and she saw that it was the man of the tawny hair. Indeed, since he was carrying his sombrero in his hand, the light tangled and kindled for an instant in his hair before he stepped on into the next shadow.

"Now, Peter," breathed Joan, "faster than you've ever run before!"

And yet she did not relax her pull on the reins. It was as if her conscious will strove to carry her away and a stronger subconscious power kept her there and made her glance hastily around her.

There was a labyrinth of passages twisting among the shrubs, made doubly baffling by the white light and the black shadows cast by the moon.

And, instead of fleeing, she reined Peter backward into a thick circle of the cedars,

sprang to the ground, and took shelter behind a big cactus.

"Hello!" called the voice of the man again. "Who's there?"

"Why are you coming?" asked Joan, and her voice shook with excitement.

"Because I'd walk ten miles and swim a river to see the girl that was singing that old song," he answered. "Just a minute until I get through this cactus—the stuff is like a lot of fish-hooks."

She slipped to the side. He must not come too close to Peter. And from a fresh covert she called softly:

"Who are you?"

"My name is Harry Gloster. What is yours? Hello—where have you gone?"

He had come out on the farther side of the thicket.

"Not far from you," she answered.

He hurried toward her. And in the moonshine he appeared a giant. Back among the cedars she stole, and that same ability to move like a soundless shadow which had been hers when she was leaving the ranch-house was with her again.

Then she stood fast in the deep shadow of a tall shrub, and saw Gloster blunder past her, sweeping the very spot where she stood, but seeing nothing. It was as if she were wrapped in some fabled cloak of darkness.

And in her heart she wished that she could step out before him. If clever Nell were there, that was what she would have done. But Nell was dressed like a bit of sunset cloud, and Joan was clad in khaki. How could she let him see her, drab as that shadow in which she stood?

And yet, it was hard to leave him, also!

She stepped to the other side of the cedar, peering through its branches, and saw him come running back, then stop in an open space. The moon struck full upon him. He was half laughing and half frowning, and such was his excitement that he still carried his hat in his hand, crushed to a shapeless mass in his fingers.

"Where are you?" he cried again, guarding his voice that it might not penetrate farther than the little copse and to the ears of some strolling couples in the clearing beside the school.

The wind increased at that moment, with a rustling and rushing among the branches, and Joan, pitching her voice far and thin, answered him.

"Here!" she called.

He turned about face.

"The devil," she heard him mutter, "she has wings!" He added aloud: "I won't hunt for you if you don't want me to."

"Do you promise that?" asked Joan.

He faced sharply toward her again, appeared about to make a step in her direction, and checked himself.

"I'll promise if I have to," said Harry Gloster gloomily.

"Then I'll stay a while," she answered. "But why have you come running in here?"

"You know better than I do."

"I haven't the least idea."

"Why do birds sing in the spring?"

"To call a—" She checked herself in confusion.

"That's right!" he laughed. "To call a mate. And when you said in that song that you understood love—"

"The song may have said it. I did not."

"Your whole voice was full of it."

"I know nothing about the tricks my voice may have been playing."

He moved a half step closer.

"Your promise!" she cried.

He retreated again with a sort of groan, and Joan wondered at him. If she had been in his place, strong as a giant and free as the wind, would a single promise have held her back? She decided with a little shudder that it would not.

And, in the meantime, she was studying him intently. She knew little about men. She had seen cow-punchers on the ranch, of course, but Buck Daniels appeared to have a penchant for old and withered fellows who had lost interest in everything except their cigarettes and their stories of their youth. And every one else she had met, with hardly an exception, had been merely in passing.

A thousand times, by hints and direct commands, Buck Daniels had ordered her to pay no attention to men—to young men. And she had obeyed. Sometimes, when it

was necessary for her to go into the town, she had felt eyes taking hold on her, but she had never looked back to meet those glances.

It seemed to her now that she was seeing a man for the first time. And what a man he was! How he had stood forth in the schoolhouse dance hall among the crowd! There was power in a simple gesture to have crushed an ordinary man, she felt. And yet at the same time there was a gentleness in him so that his promise could tie up all his strength.

"I'll keep my promise," he was saying, "if you want to hold me to it. But it's sort of hard to talk to a tree, this way."

"I don't see why," Joan murmured. "You can hear me—I can hear you."

"It ain't the words that I mean," he insisted. "They're the least part of a talk."

"What is it made up of, then?"

"The way you turn your head, the way you lift your eyes, the way you smile or you frown, and the color of your hair, is a pile more important than a hundred words, the best words that ever come out of any one's mouth."

"What color, then, is it?" she asked.

He considered a moment.

"The chief light that I got to see you by," he confessed, "is that song that I heard you singing. And out of that I'd say that your hair is black, and your eyes are black, and your skin is sort of olive with the color under it. Am I right?"

She paused before she could answer. It had been a grievous blow, for some foolish reason, to hear him. Every stroke in the picture had been so utterly unlike the truth that it lay like a weight upon her. What she wanted to do was to step out and show him the truth—but something held her back. For if she showed him the truth, would he not turn his back on her? But if she left him with his illusion, he might carry away his false picture linked up with her real voice, and so for a time she would live in his memory—a sort of ghostly travesty of what she really was.

"Am I right?" he was repeating.

"Yes," she answered, "you're right—that is, in general."

"What does that mean? But I don't care about that. What I want to hear is your name and what I want to see is your face."

She was silent.

"Are you afraid even to tell me your name?" he asked.

Still she did not speak, and she saw him drop his head a little and close his hands.

"Listen to me," he said almost sternly. "If you've run away from your husband and gone gadding to-night—no matter what it is that makes you want to keep in secret, I'll keep that secret on my honor. But let me know enough so that I can find you again!"

She saw the picture in vivid colors—this big fellow coming home to call on her, and Buck Daniels meeting him at the door; terrible Buck Daniels, in whose hands the metal and wood of a revolver became a living thing which could not fail to kill. She had seen him tear to pieces with a bullet a little squirrel sitting up on a limb like a tiny peg. She had seen him do this from a galloping horse. She had seen him casually clip high twigs from trees in order to cut loose and float down to her a nest which she wished to have.

And with that artistry of destruction arrayed against him, all the strength of Harry Gloster would be of no avail. She knew more than this—that sooner than see her become acquainted with a young man, Buck Daniels would pick the quarrel and force the fight. And while all her heart was knocking in her throat, choking her with the desire to speak the truth, she found that fear of Buck was even greater, and she could not say a word.

"I can't tell you," she said.

"But, if you don't, I'll never be able to find you. Yet I *shall* find you, if I have to spend ten years hunting. But, good God—with only your voice to go on! Will you change your mind?"

"I cannot," she cried, half sobbing.

"But you want to! By the Lord, I can feel it in your voice."

"No, no!"

"Will you do one thing for me?"

"All I can, with all my heart."

"My God," cried the big man, "I'd give

ten years of my life for one look at you; but if I can't have that, will you sing the song again for me?"

"Why?"

"It's the only clew that I'm going to have. And it ain't much to give away."

"I'll sing it, then."

Twice she tried the opening note, and twice her voice shook away to nothingness and failed her. But then the sound arose very soft and yet clear as a bell ringing:

"Que viva la rumba;
Que viva, que viva placer;
Que vivan las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
Y guapas que saben querer!"

And as she sang she began to move slowly back from behind the shrub, raising her voice in volume a little as she stole away so that he might not guess her maneuver. Why she should run away so suddenly she was not sure, but she felt a storm of emotions racking her. She was no longer sure of herself. It was not Harry Gloster she feared so much as she feared herself.

And when the last note died away she was only a step from Peter. It was not until that moment that Harry Gloster seemed to realize that she was deserting him.

She heard his voice crying out after her, and then she was lost in a blind panic which made her rush for Peter and then sent her flying away on his back. The sound of his feet over rocks and sand and the panting breath he drew drowned any calling from behind.

A moment later she was out of earshot and, looking back, she saw that she was unpursued.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

THE good old days are with us still
  Where there's a general store or grange,
A good old fashioned cider mill
  And folks are leary of what's strange;

Where the Limited never stops;
  But when it goes a-thumping through,
Out shoots an arm and down kerflops
  A tattered magazine or two;

Where every last soul in the place
  Is there to wave the brakeman thanks;
And grandma wears a cap of lace,
  And mattresses are used for banks;

Where, when there's sickness or a birth,
  The neighbors give a helping hand;
And people cuss, but love, the earth,
  And graveyards aren't a No Man's Land.

So, if it hurts like—well, Sam Hill
  To live in bad young times like these,
The good old times are with us still
  And always shall be, if you please!

Richard Butler Glaenzer.

Dan Barry's Daughter

By MAX BRAND

Author of "The Night Horseman," "Black Jack," "The Seventh Man," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART 1

JOAN, eighteen-year-old beauty who believes herself to be the daughter of Buck Daniels, ranchman, has been zealously guarded by him against the world of young men. This night she hears the call of the wild geese flying to the north, and she is strangely stirred. Then the ripe moon rises, and Joan slips away from the ranch house, saddles a horse and sends him racing over the countryside. Afar, she hears the happy, silvery laughter of other girls and she follows this musical trail to the schoolhouse where a dance is in progress. Joan spies on the merrymakers until a glimpse of a tall, broad shouldered, bronzed youth causes a delicious panic in her untried heart. She is about to flee when he challenges her in the darkness, and she pauses to flirt delicately with him, sight unseen. When he demands her name, she remembers that Buck Daniels is a killer, and she fears for this strange man's life. Leaving to him only the memory of her voice as a clew to her identity, she rides away at full speed into the night and for the moment escapes pursuit. Interwoven with this shining promise of romance are the grim threads of tragedy wherein two innocent men perish at the hands of a pitiless cutthroat.

CHAPTER VII.

OUT OF SIGHT.

THERE was an excellent reason for that. Harry Gloster had heard her horse break out of the shrubbery and, running to the place, he was in time to see the bay gelding, glistening in the moonshine, darting away at full speed. Even with an equal start he knew that he could not keep in touch with that fugitive. And through a strange country by night it was impossible to trace her.

Yet he was so excited that for a time reason had nothing to do with his actions. He ran a short distance on foot before he realized his folly. Then, standing for another moment, he watched the horse fade into the moon-haze and knew that he had lost her indeed.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for June 30.

The sound of her voice and "*Que viva la rumba*" was all that he had by which to trail her. It would have been better to have had nothing at all. He tried the effect of cold-blooded argument as he turned and walked slowly back. In the first place, he had not seen her face. In the second place he knew nothing whatever about her. She might be a mere imp of the desert with sunfaded hair and freckles strewn across her nose.

But he found that impulse was breaking through reason again and again. He had heard only her voice, but it was a voice to dream of—low, sweet-toned, gentle—and all the freshness of girlhood was in it. She must be beautiful, he told himself, with such a voice as that.

He was beginning to feel that an ugly fate had hold of him in this country. In the first place, there had been that singular meeting with a man whose eyes had such power that they had pierced through and through him and got quite at the heart of his story. He was fleeing for the Rio Grande and if he was caught the chances were considerably more than three out of four that he would be swung from the gallows for having shortened the life of a fellow man.

Lee Haines had looked him through and through, and for that very reason he should have started south again as fast as a staggeringly weary horse could take him. But he had lingered until he was drawn into battle again, and in that fight he had made a mortal enemy of Joe. Joe Macarthur he had learned that the man's name was, and Haines had understated the formidable character of the fellow.

Now, then, that one man had discovered that he was a fugitive and that another was on his trail to "get" him, certainly he had reasons enough for wishing to leave the town at a full gallop. But he had deliberately lingered, jogging only a mile or two south and then making a detour.

Joe Macarthur would thunder south along the trail which a dozen people could point out to him. Let him go! Harry Gloster would start later and by a different route. For he had no desire to meet a man who was a professional in the use of a gun.

He himself could occasionally hit a target—if it were large enough and he had time enough to aim with care, but this magic of swift drawing and murderous straight shooting combined was quite beyond him. Fighting for its own sake he loved with a passionate devotion.

But to face a gunman would be suicide. So he had lingered in the town until the dark, and then he started forth leisurely on a trail that ran south and west. So it was that he came to the lighted schoolhouse. Twice he rode by it, and twice he turned and came back to listen to the gusts of young voices and to the bursts of the music. All common sense told him to be off and away. But it was a year since he had danced, and Harry Gloster was young.

So he went inside the school, but once inside he regretted his step more than ever. Something had died in him, so it seemed, during that last year. The music was flat; not a smile which his great size and his handsome face won for him penetrated his armor of indifference, and after he had spent fifteen minutes in the hall he got up and left. He was on his way to his horse when he heard

> "Que viva la rumba,
> Que viva, que viva placer—"

ring sweet and thin from the thicket.

And now he was coming back toward his horse with the solemn realization that there would be no shelter for him below the Rio Grande. For, sooner or later, he must come back to find the trail of this nameless girl, and when he returned he would be placing his head in the lion's mouth of the law. But he knew himself too well to dream that he could hold out long against the temptation.

He paused again on his way to the horse. The music had a different meaning, now. His pulse was quick. His blood was hot. And there was a tingle of uneasiness which ran from hand to foot. Had he known that Joe Macarthur himself was in that dancehall, he would have entered again and taken his chance, which was not a chance at all.

Up the steps he went, and into the hurly-burly of a dance which was just beginning. He was too late to get a partner. As usual, there were three men for every two girls at this Western dance. Every girl was swept up in half a minute after a dance began, and still there were men along the walls and smoking on the steps.

Harry Gloster went to the orchestra. It consisted of a drummer, a cornetist, a violinist, and an individual playing a braying trombone which from time to time shook the whole place with its thunder. Into the hand of the violinist Harry Gloster slipped a five dollar bill.

"Switch back to '*Que viva la rumba*' when you get a chance," he said, and walked hurriedly away; for if he had stayed the old musician would doubtless have had pride enough to refuse the money. It was a tag dance which he was watching, a queer institution installed particularly for merrymakings in which there was a shortage of girls. Once the dance was under way the men from the sides worked onto the floor and touched the arms of those who were dancing with the girls of their choice. And so there was, perforce, a change of partners, and many a girl found herself whirling away in the arms of a man she had never known before.

Harry Gloster, from the side, watched the jumble of interweaving forms—saw the vain effort of dancing couples to elude the approach of the taggers—heard the uproar of laughter which almost drowned the strain of the waltz. There was a brief pause in the music, then the orchestra struck into the pleasant rhythm of "*Que viva la rumba,*" and the dance, which had hardly paused, started again more wildly than ever.

Gloster, searching the faces, felt that they had been transformed. That old touch of magic which he had felt in his boyhood, now had returned. Yonder in the moonshine he had been touched by the wand and poured full of the enchantment. And he knew it well enough. But so long as the illusion lasted, why should he give up the happiness? One dance, then away for the border!

How should he choose? They all appeared delightful enough to him now. Their smiles were like glimpses of blue sky after storm, and their bodies seemed floating and whirling lightly on the stream of the music. Yonder one with red hair was tagged so often that she was repeatedly whirling from the arms of one man to another, and yet her laughter never stopped. Should he touch her arm?

And there was another, slender, joyous—who changed partners often enough, but never lost her step. And here was a third with great, brown eyes and brown hair coiled low on her neck and dressed in a clinging mist of a gown like sunset-tinted bit of cloud—

Instantly, Harry Gloster was through the press, moving with wonderful lightness for so large a man. He touched the arm of the man who danced with that pink-clad vision, and received a stare of surprise from under level black brows.

"Next time around, Nell," said he, stepping slowly back and still keeping his glance fixed upon Gloster.

"All right, John," she answered, and then was away in the arms of Gloster.

"Nobody was tagging you," he said.

"No," she answered, demurely.

"Why not? Engaged to friend John?"

"Maybe," she answered, without raising her eys.

But Harry Gloster only laughed.

"I've broken the ice for you, then. Here comes a couple to get you. Shall I let them have you?"

And at this, finally, she looked up. They were great brown eyes, indeed, and filled with an almost too perfect meekness.

"Can you help it?" she asked.

"Say the word and I'll show you the trick."

Some of the meekness left her eyes and a glimmer of mischief took its place.

"If you can—" she said.

It was done with miraculous skill. A slight increase in their speed—they whirled toward one prospective and eager-faced tagger, then away from his reaching finger-tips—then toward the other, and away again, like a leaf which wind currents throw up and down, suddenly, but never with jar or jerk.

"How in the world did you do it?" she was laughing up to him.

He drank in that laughter, frankly, meeting her eyes as he had never met the eyes of any woman before. What did it matter? She was only a ghost. The reality was far away, fleeing through the haze of moonshine.

"You're going to forget John—for this one dance," he commanded. "You're engaged to me, understand?—for five minutes!"

"What do you mean?" gasped Nell.

"You know what I mean."

He dodged an aggressive tagger and then sped on.

"If John doesn't get me," she was saying, "on this round, he'll be furious."

"It does John good to be furious," answered Gloster. "We're too happy to be bothered."

"We?"

"You are or will be. I'm happy enough to make up for two. It's overflowing. D'you feel it come out of my fingertips at your back, like electricity?"

Her eyes were frightened, but her lips were smiling.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking you with me. For five minutes, you understand? Going to see how much action we can crowd into that time—"

"And after that—"

"I'm going away. Never see you again!"

"You're not like other people," she said almost wistfully.

"Not a bit. Here's John again! Dance faster. Longer steps! We're going to dodge him if you help—"

And help she did. She became as light as that whirling leaf he had thought of before. It seemed that his mere volition was guiding her.

"The devil!" muttered Harry Gloster. "Someone tagged me then. But we're going on—"

"Oh, there'll be trouble about it! It's the rule!"

"D'you care about rules?"

"Not the least in the world!"

She had caught the fire at last. A rioting carelessness was in her eyes.

"There's another hand at my shoulder!"

They had swerved deftly away, but John had apparently been watching the previous tactics of this big stranger, and his hand touched Gloster. But Gloster danced on, with the girl in his arms.

"What will happen? What will they do?" the girl was breathing close to his face.

"That's for them to worry about. This dance is *ours!*"

He drew her a little closer.

"I feel your heart keeping time—with the music," he whispered.

"You mustn't look at me like that!"

"Why not?"

"They'll know what you're saying—"

"They'll only wish they'd said it first—"

"And John will be wild—"

"The wilder he is to-night the tamer he'll be to-morrow! By the Lord, you're too wonderful to be true!"

"I won't listen to you!"

"Close your ears to me, then, and listen to the music. D'you hear it?

"Que viva la rumba;
Que viva, que viva placer;
Que viva las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
Y guapas que saben querer."

"It's talking for me, Nell!"

"There! You were tagged again!"

"What do I care?"

"Oh, everyone is looking at us!"

"Let them look. You're worth seeing, Nell!"

"They'll fight you about this."

"Do you mind being fought for? I'd like to fight for you, Nell. There's John again—but this time we've dodged him. But look at them coming! A dozen ready to tag me. Nell, you're a popular girl! Confound them, they won't have you yet!"

"Please!"

"Please what? Do you want me to let you go?"

"I—I—no!" She pressed a little closer to him. "Don't let them take me!"

"Que viva la rumba,
Que viva, que viva placer—"

He sang it in a ringing bass.

"Every person is looking at you!"

"No—at you, Nell. Two minutes out of my five are left. I'm going to have you to myself that long!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Take you out of this place before they tag me with a club."

"Take me where?"

"Outside. We're going to sit on the moonlight side of a tree, and I'm going to make love to you, Nell, as you were never made love to before."

"Do you think I've gone mad? I won't go a step with you!"

"Hush, Nell. I know that you trust me."

"Not a bit."

"Look me in the eye when you say that."

She flushed gloriously and her eye wavered under his glance.

"You're a dear, Nell. But I want to have you where it's quiet to tell you just how dear you are. When we get to the end of the hall, out through the door we go together. You understand?"

"Yes—no! Of course I won't go."

"I won't try to make you. Tell me for the last time? You're going to hear me? Only for two minutes, and then I'm gone!"

"Oh!" cried she. "My head is swimming!"

"With the music!"

"I'll go. I don't care what they say!"

"Nor I what they do."

They reached the end of the hall, swung deftly through the outer line of the dancers, and were suddenly through the door, leaving a gasp of wonder behind them. They stood at the head of the steps, worn and hollowed by the scraping feet of school children. Before them was the moonlit world.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN OUTLANDER OFFENDS.

THERE was no lack of brains behind the level black brows of John Gainor. His temper was as eager and as sanguinary as that of any man, but he was possessed of a controlling discretion. When, after having tagged Gloster, he saw the big man dance serenely on, his first impulse was to jump at his throat and tear him away. But the very size of Harry Gloster was enough to make Gainor doubly thoughtful.

So, instead of acting on the first rash impulse, he stepped back to consider the situation again. Had it been the first time that Nell had stepped from the conventional path, passion might have carried him away, but he had watched her flirting a dozen times, and this was simply the old story retold, he decided. It would not do to make himself ridiculous before the crowd.

Again, he was by no means sure how far he could go with Nell. Whether she was in love with him or with his father's ranch he had never been quite able to make up his mind. On occasion he presumed on the rights of being her fiancé, but those occasions were few and far between. That same night he had already laid down the law to her, and she had submitted, as he thought, with tears.

So far, so good. But if he tempted her again, might she not fling away from him and wreck all his hopes with a single fiery sentence? He knew her well enough to feel the danger. And this, plus the physical dimensions of Harry Gloster, made him pause to consider.

In another moment he was glad that he had delayed, for Gloster was tagged by half a dozen other men, and yet still went serenely on and showed not the slightest intention of abandoning his partner. It was not Gainor alone who had been insulted, but a whole group of men, and every one of them was on fire with rage. Moreover, they were not fellows to lie down under such an insult. Indeed, Gainor could not have named a more formidable group of cow-punchers, selected at random, than Bud Lane and Lefty Wallace and the others who had just been offended.

In fact, they were such men that he could not imagine what had led Nell to permit her partner to offend them. For Gainor knew that, no matter how willful and careless and emotional Nell might seem, at heart she was a profound little diplomat, and only gave offense to-day that she might

be the more gracious to the offended tomorrow. She had been worshiped by a score of admirers in her time, and although they were without hope to-day, they still continued to worship.

Something most extraordinary must have happened to sweep Nell off her feet in such a fashion. He studied her with a painful anxiety and closeness. What he saw was that there were ample grounds for fear. For Nell was transformed and radiant in the arms of this big man. She leaned back in them and looked up to him with laughter on her lips. She was so enchanting that the heart of John Gainor throbbed.

But still he took no hasty steps. It was not until he saw the couple swing off the dance floor at the end of the hall and disappear through the door that he began to act in the offensive.

The whole room was buzzing with it. The orchestra labored in vain at the animated strains of "*Que viva la rumba,*" for the dancers were lagging at their work and busily exchanging murmurs and glances. On the farther side of the room the half dozen men who had been directly insulted by Gloster had gathered in a close group. And for these John Gainor made. The ground was plowed. He had only to drop the seed with a few words.

"What shall I do, boys?" he asked. "Take this for a joke, or go out and tear into that fellow? What's his name? Who is he? Friend of any of you?"

"Slick stranger!" said big Bud Lane. He was one of those blond, gentle giants who do not know fear, but who are rarely kindled to anger. It took a long time for rage to penetrate to the farthest corners of his being; but this was one of the exceptions. "That gent ain't one that works with friends. He plays a lone hand. And if it wasn't for Nell, I'd go out and bust his head wide open for him."

"That's it," nodded Gainor sadly. "I don't want to offend Nell. I dunno what happened. He must 've hypnotized her."

"That's what he done. I seen how fast he was talking," put in Lefty. "There ain't any honest man that can talk as fast as he was talking. A gent don't get thoughts that quick."

"I'm going out to have a look at him," declared Gainor.

"I'm coming along," said Bud.

And the rest, with a resolute clamor, crowded along, while a hush fell over the dancers and the orchestra increased its pace to rush the piece to its close.

Outside passed that little impromptu posse.

"Mind you, boys," said Gainor, "no guns!"

He would be held up as the ringleader of that group and if serious harm came to Gloster he would be made to account for it.

"It's fists!" rumbled Bud Lane. "I don't want a gun. I just want to set my hands on him—"

And he stretched out his big fists. Gainor looked upon him with vast approval. He recalled having seen Bud pull over two strong men in a tug-of-war. He had seen him throw up a three-hundred-pound bale of hay "four high" with the hooks.

And the story of how Bud Lane wrecked Murphy's place when he was short changed there was a tale of Homeric qualities. Every year the story was told and every year it grew a little, perhaps, but the sheriff himself was witness to the final picture of five men piled crisscross in the center of the wreckage on Murphy's floor with Bud Lane sitting on top of them and rolling a cigarette. Gainor remembered that tale, and he moistened his dry lips.

But where were Nell and the stranger?

The "posse" passed to the foot of the steps and went by the sheriff himself. He was sitting on a stump smoking, and he grinned at them in a friendly fashion which plainly bade them go as far as they liked. For the sheriff was a wise man and he knew the difference between a duty done and a vote lost.

"We're all right, boys," declared Gainor as they went on. "Sim Haynes passed me the wink. We can go the limit with the big stranger!"

"There they are!" whispered some one.

And to the shocked and astonished eyes of John Gainor there was revealed the following picture. Beneath a tree not twenty yards away sat Nell and the stranger, brazenly facing toward the moon, and that cruel-

ly clear white light showed them leaning close together—mortally close.

It could not be, and yet it indubitably was true, that the arm of the big man was around Nell, and that her head was back against his shoulder, and that she was faintly smiling up to him with eyes half closed. A sword of fire was struck through the heart of Gainor. The big man leaned. His head of tawny, shaggy hair obscured the face of the girl. He had kissed her!

John Gainor found himself walking alone toward the place. He had covered half the distance before the first swirl of rage abated. And he slackened his pace so that the others might catch up with him. They paused a short distance away as Gainor stepped forward again and stood before the guilty pair.

Nell sat up with a little cry. Hypnotism it surely had been. She looked around her with bewildered, unseeing eyes, and then suddenly threw her hands before her face.

But Harry Gloster arose, leisurely and faced the other. After all, he was not so tall. He seemed much larger than he was considered by himself. In cold fact, when compared with another, he was hardly more than six feet. John Gainor thrilled with surprise to find that he was looking almost level into the eyes of the stranger.

"I—we've come out to have a little talk with you," he declared.

"I'm a busy man," said Harry Gloster, shamelessly. "But go ahead and do the talking."

Gainor bit his lip. It was a rare thing for his father's son to be talked to in this fashion.

"Most like," he said, "you ain't been to many dances?"

"Considerable some," admitted Gloster.

"Which you don't seem to know what's manners on a dance floor."

Harry Gloster sighed.

"Son," he said. "I'm a plumb peaceful man. Are you trying to pick trouble with me?"

"We're looking for an apology," said John, more mildly. "You've insulted six of us here."

"I hate apologies," said Gloster easily. "I sure hate 'em."

"The damned pup!" exploded a voice from the background. "Lemme talk to him!"

"Did I hear you cussing out me?" asked Harry Gloster, smiling.

"You sure did!" cried Andrews, pressing to the fore. "And, what's more—"

He proceeded no farther, for he was struck down by something as inescapable as a lightning flash. It is the instinct of a fighting man to lean back and start his fist far behind him so that it flies through a wide arc and it is seen coming far away.

But now and again one comes upon warriors who understand the value of the jab. The jab, strictly speaking, is not a movement of the arm. It is a jerk of the entire body, a convulsive twist of muscles which shoots the whole mass from head to foot into motion.

The arm is simply made into a rigid part of the body and the fist is the focal point which strikes the enemy. The whole distance the striking fist covers is short. Perhaps it only travels six inches. But the effect is astounding.

Imagine, for instance, a hundred and fifty pound cube of iron lifted six inches from the floor and allowed to drop. The shock makes the floor quake. Now supply the iron mass with a projecting knob with a surface of a few square inches and let the mass fall again. This time, if it does not break the flooring with the concentrated impact, it will at least grind deep into the solid wood. Such is the jab.

With feet braced and fist extended and arm made rigid, the body is suddenly twisted and the blow darts home. Amateurs never use it unless they are possessed of an inborn genius. Even in the professional ring there are few, wonderfully few, adepts. But now and then, as the gladiators come together in the middle of the ring, it is seen that one of them, without an apparent blow having been struck, shudders from head to foot and suddenly collapses inert along the floor.

There is no use waiting for the count. Rubbing and water and care will bring back his senses in five minutes or more. What has struck him, then? Dismiss all doubt. It is the jab which has been used.

Or perhaps there is a variation. Instead of striking straight with rigid forearm, the fighter twists his fists and jerks it in and down a trifle. The result is hardly less of a shock combined with a tearing jar which, if the blow lands on the side, almost rips the flesh loose from the ribs, and if it strikes on the jaw converts a man's muscles into water and lets him flow to the floor a stunned, senseless thing.

From which it might be judged that all fighters would use this blow. But that is not the case for two reasons. A long, straight punch or a sweeping swing is so terrible to the eye, so impressive to the imagination, that it is an undying temptation. But the chief reason that the jab is not popular is that so few can use it, unless the word is applied to its distant cousin, the stiff armed, long distance left jab. And the reason it cannot be used by most is that it requires a sort of explosion of nerve energy, a tensing of muscles until they become rock, so that the striking is like the leap of an electric spark.

All this has been said to explain what happened to Andrews. For to every one, including himself, it afterward seemed a miracle. He had floundered in close to Harry Gloster with his fists ready. He was a big man, was Andrews. He was not a giant like Bud Lane, but he was fully the equal in mass of Harry Gloster.

Suddenly he was struck to the earth and lay writhing, unable to groan, his arms wrapped around his ribs, his mouth gasping and his teeth biting at the air which he could not get. And all that had happened to account for this catastrophe had been a slight twitch of the body and shoulder of Gloster.

He now stepped over the prostrate Andrews and faced John Gainor. Gainor did not like fighting because even money cannot avoid wounds. Nevertheless, he was not a coward. And if ever a man had reason to fight well, he had it.

Yonder sat his lady in the light of the moon, entranced with terror and wonder—with perhaps a primitive dash of delight to see herself fought for. And around Gainor, with a rush, came five hard fighting men. So John Gainor put all his might behind his fists and drove them at the head of the other.

The blows plunged through thinnest air. Harry Gloster had stepped with amazing lightness to the side and now another light dancing step brought him close in. His feet were firm planted, his body loose. Suddenly it contracted. Body and head jerked stiffly halfway round and a bony fist jarred against Gainor's jaw.

John threw up his arms, left his feet, described a perfect half circle, and landed on the back of his neck, his full length away from the spot where he had stood. It had not been like the striking of a blow. It was rather an explosion of dynamite. Flesh could not resist.

To the honor of the other five, be it said that they would never have imposed such odds upon any man, no matter what a villain. But they had no choice. They were assailed by a dodging tornado, so to speak. They saw before them a solid bulk of two hundred pounds.

They struck at the midst of that bulk, and their fists either bit the air or else glanced from a raised shoulder or a brawny arm. And in return they received a machine gun fire of blows which were like the hammer of a double jack against the steel drill head.

No swinging punches which could be blocked in the distance or avoided, but short, sharp hammer strokes came home against them. If a man happened to be firmly planted, he went down to rise no more for some minutes. If he was recoiling from the attack, he was merely half stunned. There was a brief swirl.

When Harry Gloster stepped out of it, two more men were down. And of the other three, two were gaping and wild eyed. Only big Bud Lane had not been touched.

At him drove Harry Gloster, high on his toes with little swift dancing steps so that he seemed to float over the ground. But the other two threw themselves between.

A piston thrust of the left hand and one went down with a gasp. A jerk of the right and stalwart Lefty crashed at the very feet of Bud Lane.

But the battle now had swept to the grip of Bud himself. He was no dancing

fighter. He did his best work with the foeman inside his arms, and that was where Harry Gloster found himself.

He had no time to strike again. A semi-jab landed on Bud's ribs and felt to him as if he had grazed a projecting knob of granite. But the pain merely made him exert himself, and when he exerted himself he was irresistible.

Gathered in that bear hug, Gloster swayed a moment and then they went down together. It was what Bud wanted. He had wrestled all his life, and on the ground he was perfectly at home. Lying flat on his back he was still as formidable as a mountain lion.

He reached for a half nelson as they were falling, got it, told himself that the glory was his—and then found that his hand had slipped off. Gloster had "shelled" his head between the outthrust of his big shoulders.

There was a whirling activity under Bud Lane. He felt as if he were lying on six small men instead of one big one. And no matter where he reached he could not secure a grip. Suddenly the victim was away. A voice was calling joyously above Bud: "All right, partner. Another whirl—best time I've had in ten years—"

Bud Lane sat up, dazed and unhappy with wonder, and at that moment he saw the sheriff himself step into view with the long and glistening form of a six-shooter in his hand.

"Son," he said to Gloster, "you've had a nice little party out here. I figure that maybe I'd better take you to town where you can have a nice little rest! This is after sunset and I sure enough hate to see a gent working overtime!"

CHAPTER IX.

"QUE VIVA LA RUMBA."

THE fear which drove Joan lasted well-nigh until she had reached the house of Buck Daniels. Then it disappeared, only to be replaced by another dread. What if he should know that she had left the house?

However, that was a bridge that must be crossed when she came to it. She brought Peter back to his corral, and unsaddled him by pauses, her mind was so filled with other things.

But she recalled the necessities of the moment enough to scatter earth over Peter's sweating body. In the morning it would look as if he had simply rolled, during the night, near the water hole at the farther end of the corral, and no one who did not look very close would distinguish the sweat-marks.

When she had done this she went back toward the house. It had been a very futile and foolish thing, she felt, this ride through the darkness, and, above all, the talk with Harry Gloster. And yet, somehow, she was returning richer than when she had started.

She entered the house and went through it with the same ghostly silence, and again, as she climbed the stairs, there was not a sound underfoot. But when she opened the door to her room she saw the broad outline of a man's shoulders against the stars beyond her window. It stopped her with a shock of fear, but the gentle voice of Buck Daniels spoke immediately.

"Joan?"

"Yes."

"I'll light the lamp."

His voice was perfectly quiet and half of her fear died away until she watched his hand as he held the match to the wick of the lamp, for that hand was trembling. And a sudden concern for him swallowed her terror.

She half expected that he would raise the lamp and stare at her by its light. And if he did so it seemed to Joan that he could not help but see much that was newly written in her face.

But, although the language of Buck was not polished nor his manners either, he was full of a native gentleness. It never had showed more than at present as he went back to his chair, sat down, and rolled a cigarette, his eyes never lifted to Joan.

It was as if he bade her rally herself for the ordeal; it was like a declaration that he would not spy upon her mind. And when at length he raised his glance to her, it was with an effort that crossed his forehead with wrinkles of pain.

"Joan, dear—" he said, and stopped.

She wanted to run to him and fall on her knees by his chair. She wanted to throw her arms around him and pour out the whole story of everything that had happened since she last saw him. But the thing which had held her back like a hand more than once before held her back now.

"Have you been doing this much?" he asked at last.

She shook her head. "Never before."

"Never?"

She nodded.

He went on smoking and watching her steadfastly until he had finished his cigarette, and then he said, suddenly: "Here you are standing and me sitting down!" And he started to his feet.

"Dad!" she cried, tears rushing into her eyes. "After you've worked all the day and then waited up for me so many hours tonight?"

She curled up on the bed with her elbow on the footboard. That brought her face perilously close to him. He would be able to watch and estimate every alteration of her expression. Nevertheless, there she sat.

It seemed to her that he would never begin. She would much rather have faced an outburst of extravagant anger and yet more extravagant threats and commands. But she felt rather helpless in the face of this working soul of Buck Daniels. He went forward slowly, with a weight of grief and anxiety weighing him down.

"Joan," he said at last, "I guess I've made you pretty unhappy here."

"Oh, no!"

He shook his head.

"That means 'yes.' Well, I ain't very entertaining, and you're pretty young. Maybe you'll be glad to know that we're going to leave the ranch pretty soon?"

"Leave the ranch?"

"I got an offer a while back. I think I'll take it."

"That offer from Mr. Calkett?"

"That's the one."

"But you said that was terribly small?"

"It's large enough. It 'll do to move us."

"But where, dad?"

"East."

"East!"

"To some city. Maybe to New York."

"Oh, do you mean that?"

"That 'd make you happy, Joan?"

"Oh, yes!"

He sighed.

"But what about you, dad? What would you do away from the mountains and the desert?"

"Man of my age gets on mostly any place."

"Dad, it would be only for my sake! But because I take a ride by night, why should we have to leave the country?"

"Will you tell me where you went, Joan?"

"I can't do that."

She watched his face turn gray, although he said not a word.

"I want to tell you, dad—but something—"

"Joan, something has happened between us. It's been a couple of years since you've changed toward me. What is it?"

"Nothing," she said stanchly.

"Tell me the true of it, Joan."

She shook her head again, and as she did so she heard a voice come clear and small across the night from the direction of the road—a voice full of quavers such as are thrown into singing by the jolting of a buckboard. And the song he sang was:

> "Que viva la rumba;
> Que viva, que viva placer;
> Que viva las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
> Y guapas que saben querer."

It brought her to her feet, trembling, listening with her soul in her face. And as the voice faded out with a swiftness which spoke eloquently of the speed with which the singer was traveling, Joan looked down to Buck and knew that he had seen enough.

"You've been seeing a man!" he cried. "My God, is that it?"

His horror was so strong that she went a little back from him.

"Why shouldn't I see a man?" she asked.

"Who is it?" groaned Buck Daniels in a sort of ecstasy of rage and grief. "What's his name?"

She shook her head. It was a very wonderful thing to see Buck so perturbed. She could never have imagined it. But

watching him now, she knew that he was a man capable of violence. He was beginning to walk up and down the room, pausing sharply now and again, and then walking on once more with his fingers working and a wedge of muscle thrusting out from the base of his jaw.

"When did you first meet him?" he asked at length.

"To-night," she answered.

"Don't tell that lie to me!" he thundered. "This gent has turned your head. Want me to think that he did it at one meeting? No, you ain't *plumb* crazy, and don't think that *I'm* crazy, too."

She had never heard such words from him before; she had never dreamed that he was even capable of uttering them. But she made no reply, merely sitting quietly and staring into his excited face.

"Talk, talk!" he commanded. "Lemme hear what you got to say for yourself!"

She shook her head; and this denial threw him into such a frenzy that she was almost afraid, for the moment, that he was going to strike her. It was not really fear that she felt, however, so much as a sad marveling at these passions in him.

"What was the song that I heard somebody singing a while ago on the road—the one that made you jump up to listen?"

She hesitated. But as she wavered, doubtful, so many things came back upon her mind out of that strange and happy night, that the song began to swell in her throat of her own accord. And so it came out, in the end, clear ringing, but small as the whistle of a bird:

> "Que viva la rumba;
> Que viva, que viva placer;
> Que viva las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
> Y guapas que saben querer."

He greeted this quiet little ditty with a growl of disapproval.

"I dunno that lingo," he declared, "and I'm glad that I don't. No good never come out of it. What's that song about?"

She hesitated. When one thought of the actual translation of the words, syllable by syllable, it was enough to bring the color into her cheeks. The swinging rhythm, the music itself, the pleasure of singing had obscured the syllables before. She even bit her lip now, as she remembered that she had sung this song for a man—to a man—a stranger.

"It's a—a song of happiness, I suppose I may call it," she said at last.

"Happiness? Happiness? And in that lingo?" growled Buck. "They don't have no such songs as that in that language. You're keeping things back from me, and that makes me know that this is the beginning of the end. There ain't no doubt about that. It's the beginning of the end, because we'll never trust each other again."

"Dad!" she cried. "Oh, dad, why do you say that?"

"I got a thousand good reasons. I got reasons so good—they'd turn your blood cold!"

"What do you mean? Won't you tell me? Do you think I can't stand hearing them?"

"You couldn't stand it," he said. And, going back to her, he laid a hand upon her shoulder and another upon her hair. "There's things about you," he said, "that nobody living can guess, except me. When you sit alone and do your thinking and turn over your queer ideas in you head, you think that nobody knows. But I know, Joan. I know things about you that you'll never know, God willing."

"And you've tried to keep me here away from people so that I might never find out?"

"That's it."

"But now I'll go mad with eagerness to learn."

"You will learn, now that you've started on the out trail. But I'm going to fight to keep you back from it as long as I can."

"Why do you do it, dad? Why can't I live as other young girls live? Is there anything wrong with it?"

"Not for them. They can do their laughing and their chattering. But you're meant for something else. And I've sworn that I'd keep you to a quiet life—"

"Who had the right to make you swear such a thing as that?"

"Your mother, Joan."

"My mother!"

And she saw a picture of that gentle face, unsmiling, with the gold hair framing it and tarnishing slowly to gray. Could such a woman have locked up a secret?

"Oh, what is it?" she pleaded.

"You'll learn it all. Only I hope to God that the day when you learn it is far away ahead of you. If these were the old days when a man had power over his family, I'd close you into a room and keep you there for a year, until the last echo of this '*Que viva la rumba*' had worked out of your head!"

CHAPTER X.

IT'S THE NICKNAME THAT COUNTS.

"WHY the devil," said Sheriff Sim Hargess, "do you waste all that fine singing on the empty night? Might get paid for it in town!"

"I'm a gent open-handed by nature," declared Harry Gloster. "I like to give things away—including my songs."

"All I got to say," growled the sheriff, "is that you might save your singing for them that would appreciate it a pile more than I would."

"I ain't singing to you," declared the prisoner who was chained to the seat beside the sheriff. "I'm singing to the world in general. How d'you know what might be hearing me?"

"A coyote, maybe, taking lessons off yonder on a hill," suggested the sheriff.

"Maybe," said Gloster with the most perfect good nature. "I wouldn't grudge him none. Speaking of singing, the drinks are on me, and I'm setting up to entertain."

"Rats!" said the sheriff. "You talk plumb foolish."

"You got no heart in you," said Gloster. "What functions for you is just a chunk of the law. If I was to shake you, I could hear the pages rustle. Otherwise, you'd see that I was overflowing with happiness."

"I never took none to singing," observed the sheriff dryly.

"Don't give up trying, though," urged Gloster. "Listen to this!"

And, tilting back his head, his voice rose and rang:

> "Que viva la rumba;
> Que viva, que viva placer;
> Que viva las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
> Y guapas que saben querer."

The sheriff groaned as the last note floated afar. And then, out of the thin distance, a coyote wailed an answer.

"You've waked 'em up," grinned the sheriff. "You got your audience, I see. Where'd you learn that fool thing?"

"Mexico."

"For Mexico it might do," said the sheriff pointedly.

"You're talking sort of straight," said Harry Gloster suddenly.

"That's me. I always make a habit of talking right out what I mean."

"Then swaller your tongue when you're talking to me," said Gloster, and turning in the seat as much as his handcuffs and the chain permitted, he stared fixedly into the face of Sim Hargess. "I don't need your conversation to make me happy."

The sheriff met that cold eye for an instant and then turned his attention back to his span of mustangs. He felt, in fact, that he had gone too far. And like every man who felt that he was in the wrong, he was beginning to hate his companion. But, after a moment of silence, he found that his anger was dissipating. He was a man among men, was Sim Hargess, and presently he said:

"I guess you're right, partner. You got a right to sing if you want to. I'm kind of out of sorts to-night."

"I'm sorry for that," replied the other amiably. "What's wrong, may I ask?"

"Got a fine little sorrel filly. Went lame on me this morning."

"That's sure tough," agreed Gloster. "Lemme have a look at her when we have a chance. I know something about a hoss."

He turned and looked back to his own mount trotting contentedly behind the buckboard, swinging over to one side to get free from the dust.

"Yep, that's a good one you got for yourself."

"Not bad."

"We been so dog-gone busy that I forgot to ask your name."

"Sandy Williams," said Gloster. "That is my name."

"I mean your real name."

"That's it."

The sheriff laughed.

"You waited just a minute too long before you spoke," he said. "But we'll let it go at that, Sandy. By the way, where did you learn how to handle your fists? Been in the ring?"

"Nope."

"You ain't? But you sure can step! I started out to get you as soon as the fight begun. Didn't want the mob to smash you all up. But when I seen your style, I thought I'd wait and let you work."

"Thanks," said Gloster. "It was a fine little party while it lasted."

"While it lasted, it sure was."

They reached the town and presently the jail. It was a snug little building, recently built, and the sheriff was immoderately proud of his accommodations.

"Wall a foot and a half thick," he said, tapping on it. "All hard stone, too. And these here bars are all tool-proof stuff. There ain't no better steel made."

Harry Gloster paused on his way down the aisle and gripped a bar in his manacled hands. There was a convulsive twist of his shoulders and the great steel framework shuddered violently. In the distance a lock began to swing and jingle.

"You're big," muttered the sheriff, watching closely, "but you're stronger than you look—by a pile."

"I sure hope that I don't have to bust out and spoil all your decorations," said Harry Gloster politely. "Hate to leave a hole in that wall."

The sheriff grinned and led on to the door which the deputy who acted as jailer had opened before them. There were a dozen cells on the floor, each surrounded by open bars. It was possible to survey every cell in detail at a glance.

Into one of these Gloster was led and the irons removed. He was made comfortable. Fresh drinking water was brought to fill his pitcher, and then he was locked in for the night and left reclining on his bunk and smoking a cigarette with a meditative air of content.

"You had a look at him?" asked Sim Hargess of his deputy when they were seated in the office a moment later. "You had a good look at him, George?"

"Fair to middling."

"If you was to pick out a nickname to fit him, what would you land on?"

George studied a moment. "Might call him—er—'Little Joe,' or 'Happy,' or something like that."

The sheriff nodded.

"Little Joe would be a fit," he declared. "But how would Sandy do?"

"Sandy? His hair's too yaller for any name like that, don't you figure? But how come you're aiming to pick out a name for him, Sim?"

"Said he was called 'Sandy' Williams."

He paused again.

"How did he look to you, George?"

"Sort of good-natured."

"Wouldn't mind getting into a fracas with him?"

George reached for his gun. Instinct and much training at the draw made the gesture lightning fast.

"Not if there was enough light for straight shooting," he said, with a rather twisted grin.

"That's the way I figured it," nodded the sheriff, and the frowned very seriously. "George, that fellow's got a record of some sort."

"He has? What is it?"

"I dunno. I'm going to find out. He wouldn't be traveling with a crooked name if there wasn't something wrong with him. We'll have a look around the country and listen in on what we can. Take a telegram down to the office, will you?"

And so, before many minutes, a message was ticking across the wires, north and south and east and west, inquiring from the sheriffs of many counties if a yellow-haired man over six feet tall and weighing about two hundred pounds, but looking thirty pounds bigger, were wanted for any crime.

But while this was going on, the yellow-haired man who weighed two hundred pounds and might look to be even thirty

pounds heavier, lay on his back on his bunk in the jail with his head pillowed on one thick arm, sound asleep and smiling in his dream.

CHAPTER XI.

THE HAPPY PRISONER.

IT had been the intention of Lee Haines to leave the town the next morning. And he had been on his way across the veranda of the hotel after paying his bill when he received news which halted him. A tall, well-proportioned fellow with a very handsome face and black eyes under level black brows was passing. A black plaster covered one side of his chin and the face seemed swollen and discolored.

There was a chuckle from a chair near by after the young fellow passed.

"Young Gainor ain't going to be so darned free handed after this," rumbled a cowpuncher, cocking his sombrero on the back of his head.

"He ain't," agreed his nearest neighbor. "He sure got plenty. Pretty near got a busted jaw, they say. Took him fifteen minutes before he could sit up and ask where he was."

There was another laugh.

"He swears that somebody sneaked up behind him and hit him with a crowbar on the back of the head."

"Wasn't no such thing. I seen it all. He got soaked so hard that it lifted him off of his feet and landed him on the back of his neck."

Lee Haines looked thoughtfully after the retreating back of the man who had just passed. He was well above average size. He was solidly built. He might weigh, perhaps, a hundred and eighty pounds.

And then Haines found himself subconsciously struggling to create the picture of the man who had lifted this fellow off his feet with a blow and dropped him upon the back of his head. But his mind refused to function for such a purpose. He kept imagining a giant seven feet tall with a fist as big as a water bucket. The problem fascinated him so that he turned to the cow-punchers with a question.

"Did I hear that straight? Somebody lifted him off his feet and dumped him on the back of his neck?"

Two grave pairs of eyes encountered him and examined him. He was a stranger, and a stranger was not to be answered in haste. But one of them decided that he would do.

"Ain't you heard about the fracas?" he asked in turn.

"I slept late," said Lee.

"Gent named Sandy Williams cleaned up John Gainor and six more last night at the dance."

"Seven men!"

"All of seven. It was a mighty pretty thing to watch. Drifted through 'em like quicksilver through sand. All good fighting men, too. Gainor, yonder, he's spent a lot of time on boxing lessons."

"What's Sandy? A giant?"

The two considered the question soberly.

"He looks bigger than he is," one said, and the second agreed.

Lee Haines recalled the stalwart who had walked into the hotel dining room the day before, but who, when he sat down, was hardly higher at the shoulders than Lee himself. He recalled, too, the blows that had dropped Joe Macarthur and left him senseless.

"Got a bush of curly yellow hair?" he asked.

"D'you know him?" they asked in chorus. "He's a stranger around these parts."

"I've seen him. Seems to be quite a man."

They declared fervently that he was two men rolled into one, and there followed a graphic description of the fight.

"Which he was laughing all the way through," one declared. "You'd of thought that he was dancing, or something like that. Took everything plumb easy. Floated around and jerked his fists into 'em, and every punch was like the tap of a sledge-hammer."

"I knew a man once—" began Lee Haines, and then his voice trailed away and his glance was lost in the sweep of a distant cloud. "What's become of Sandy?"

"Jail."

"Eh?"

"Five hundred dollars bail. For disturbing the peace, they say. But take it by and large, it was a mighty quiet disturbance. Judge Conley'll give him about five days in jail to let him think things over and then turn him loose. Conley is a good sort. He talks mighty loud, but the things he says ain't so bad."

Lee Haines forgot the journey which was before him. Instead, he went to the jail, and there he interviewed George, the deputy and jail keeper.

"How's the patient?" he asked.

"Wants more ham and eggs. It 'd bust the county to feed two like him. He's all stomach."

"May I see him?"

"Everybody else has seen him. I guess you can," nodded George. "Might think he was a ghost and not a man the way folks come around to stare at him."

"Does he mind it?"

"Not him. He's got a word for 'em all. He'll have a word for you. You watch!"

He escorted Haines into the main room of the jail, and then sank onto a stool.

"Don't try to pass him nothing. I'm watching," he yawned. "Darned if I ain't tired out. There he is."

It was more than Haines had dared to hope for. He went hurriedly down the aisle between the rows of bars, and presently he was before the cell in which was Harry Gloster, alias Sandy Williams.

And he found Harry on his knees, working with a deft and hasty pencil on the smooth stone flagging which had been whitened by much scrubbing. And growing upon the floor was the face of a girl, shadowy, coming out of a mist of many lines in the background. All that was real of her features and expression was the big eyes and their straight, far off look, and the curving smile, faint upon her lips.

One might have said that it was a portrait of every pretty girl in the world; certainly it was a picture of no individual. There were too many places where the imagination was left to do as it pleased.

"Well? Who's that?" asked Haines.

The other whirled on him.

"Another?" he growled, and then, seeing who it was, he arose to his feet with a smile. "Hello, Haines," he said. "Things have been happening since I saw you last."

"Quite a lot," nodded Lee Haines. "You got into one mess on my account. Now you're in another on your own. What I've come to find out is this: How important is it for you to get across the border?"

The other considered with a perfect gravity.

"The difference is between living and dying, taking it by and large," he said, and he actually grinned at Haines.

"I thought it was something like that," nodded Haines, without showing the slightest surprise or shock. "What the devil made you hang around here all yesterday?"

"No reason. Just because I was a fool."

"Why did you fight last night?"

"Been a month since I've had a fight."

"That's not true. You mixed with Joe Macarthur yesterday afternoon."

"That wasn't a fight. He just did the receiving. I got the jump on him, you see."

Lee Haines sighed.

"You're a queer one," he declared. "Is that the girl you left behind you?"

He pointed toward the floor.

"That's the girl I haven't seen," he said.

"What's that? The one you've dreamed about, eh?"

"More than that. I heard her voice once."

"What sort of crazy talk—" began Haines, and then shook his head. "You're past me, partner. Where did you pick up the knack? That looks like professional work to me!"

"I've always handled a pencil and paints when I run onto 'em. My father showed me how when I was a kid."

"Your father?"

"Up in Colorado, you know. Consumption."

Haines nodded.

"Is it straight that your bail is five hundred?"

"Something like that."

"Son, I've got less than a hundred dollars with me."

"Why, Haines, I don't expect you to help me out of this boat. You didn't put me here. It's not your party."

"I believe you mean it," said Haines, gnawing his lip thoughtfully. "You saved me yesterday; you expect me to ride along and let you rot to-day. But there are things about me you don't know yet! Partner, I'm going to have you out of this."

"That's sure fine of you, Haines."

"The thing to do, of course, is to get that bail money before they find out what's against you and hold you without bail."

"That's the natural way of going about it, I should say."

"Tell me one thing: if they get you for whatever else you're accused of, are they sure to convict you?"

"On the testimony against me, they could hang ten men."

Haines looked at him sharply. He had spent more than half of a wild life among criminals of one kind or another; but he could not place the open face of Harry Gloster in that category unless a sudden burst of passion. That, he decided, must be it. The outthrust of the jaw, the imperious nose, the restless eye were all typical of a highly excitable nature.

While he paused, a small thread of singing came wavering into the jail through a barred window which was open.

"Que viva la rumba;
Que viva, que viva placer—"

"Oh, Lord!" cried Harry Gloster, and suddenly his shrill whistle caught up the air:

"Que viva las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
Y guapas que saben querer."

"Is that a signal?" asked Haines.

But Gloster, a man transformed with happy excitement, returned no answer. He did not even speak when Haines bade him farewell and left the jail.

CHAPTER XII.

A VAIN SACRIFICE.

THERE was a swirl of people before the veranda of the hotel when Haines stepped down from the door of the jail. The group was constantly recruited. It revolved around a shining bay horse of which Haines could see the tossed head and the shining coat only by glimpses through the crowd.

But what chiefly held his eye and the eye of all the others, was a girl standing on the verge of the veranda, with her hand raised, as if asking for attention. And she was getting it in a rush.

The hat which she had been waving to call attention was in her hand. Her head was exposed, covered with a softly waved mass of golden hair—the metal gold which turns to fire when the sun strikes on it.

And her flushed face, her eager eyes, drew men as honey draws flies. Lee Haines was past the days of romance, perhaps, but nevertheless, he hastened with the others toward the focal point.

"Say it over again," someone was calling as he arrived. "We're late. We didn't hear you the first time."

"I'm going to sell this horse to the highest bidder," the girl answered. "You can try out his paces, if you wish. But I'll give you my word that he's gentle—"

There was a deep hum of chuckling from the crowd. Not a man there who did not enjoy a little pitching when he swung into the saddle of a morning. It was the quickest way of warming up both man and beast for the day's work.

"Let's have a look at him," they began to urge. "Get out of the way, Shorty. You've had a chance to size up the hoss! Lemme have a look, Sam!"

But those in the front rank, merely turning their heads with grins, announced that they had the first seats and that they intended to hold them, come what might. And so the little crowd became a heavily jammed mass. When a newcomer strove to press through he might send a wave of motion through the whole group, but he could not dislodge a single man.

But no one was looking at the horse. Instead, there was a profound concentration of attention upon the face of the girl. They gazed silently, with great wide eyes which banished the man in their faces and let the boy shine through.

They dwelt on her timidity, shrinking before so many eyes, and on her courage which spurred her on and brought the high

color into her cheeks. And they drank in the delicate contours of her face and her throat, forever changing as she turned her head.

It was as if a wild creature had dared to come in among the habitations of man in the middle of the day. An aroma of strangeness hung around her.

"Who is it?" whispered Haines, laying his hand on the shoulder of the man in front of him.

There was no answer.

"Who is it?" he repeated, increasing the strong pressure of his fingers.

His hand was struck away, but there was no other retort. In the meantime, the girl was apparently embarrassed and bewildered by the battery of eyes which searched her with never a pause. She reached down, and putting her hand under the chin of Peter, raised his head.

"Can you all see him?" she asked.

"Scatter out, you there in front," came a roar of voices from the rear. "We can't see nothing."

Of course, it was not Peter they alluded to and although they were close enough to see the girl, Lee Haines did not blame them for wanting to be closer. He wished to be closer himself. He felt a tingle of pleasure at the thought of standing near her, as though, indeed, she were surrounded by an electric atmosphere.

And he knew that a close eye would find no imperfections, that the careful examination would reveal no trace of wrinkles around the eyes, no weariness about the mouth. It was as if the freshness of the dawn were to step into the middle of the noonday and refuse to fade with all its delicate colors.

"Peter, dear," he heard the voice of the girl saying, and his heart melted at the sound. "Come up here where they can see you. Good boy! Up!"

She clapped her hands together, leaning and smiling down to the horse. And up he leaped like a dog, and whirled hastily to keep his eye on this unaccustomed crowd. There was a rumble of admiration and applause, for both the girl and the horse.

And indeed, Peter was as worthy of attention as the girl, in his own way. He stood not more than an inch or two over fifteen hands, and he was delicately made, but every scruple of his body was formed with a perfect hand. He could have stepped into a book as a type of what a horse should be. And yet he had strength as well.

One could see that he could run smoothly and as long as a clock could tick. There was a catlike nimbleness about him. And as he stood on the boards of the veranda, shifting his feet as he felt the old wood yield under him, he gave an impression of wonderful lightness, as though he would have bounded, the next instant, over the heads of the crowd and darted away for freedom.

Into the place which he had left vacant at the edge of the veranda the crowd had washed instantly. A thick row of sombreros tilted up as their wearers stared at the girl.

"Here is Peter," she said, and as she extended a hand toward him he pricked his ears and thrust out his nose to sniff at it. "And, oh, if I should tell you what a good horse he is, you'd hardly be able to believe!"

"We'll believe," rumbled someone, and there was an eloquent grunt from the others. They would have believed anything from her lips, felt Lee Haines. He was ready for the same thing himself.

"You won't have to chase him across fields the way I've seen some people chasing horses. When you go to the fence and call he'll come to you. And if you haven't any sugar, he's just as happy!"

There was a faint chuckle from the crowd. The thought of carrying sugar for a horse was a stretch outside of their imaginations.

"You won't need a whip or spurs for Peter. He'll run till his heart breaks for you!"

Her eyes grew bright with tears, so great was her earnestness. In quite forgetting all her timidity in her enthusiasm for Peter, she stood straighter and her voice rose a little, while she passed an affectionate arm under Peter's head—and he stood as still as a rock.

"And he's always the same. He's never

tired. You can ride him every day. He'll never be lame. He's true gold all the way through! On my honor!"

She paused and drew another breath.

"I have to sell him," she said sadly. "To some man who'll be kind to him, I know. For who could help being kind to Peter?"

She paused again with a hand extended frankly, as though to invite them into her perfect confidence in all mankind, and there was a little sway and stir in the crowd as every man vainly strove to get closer.

"And so, if any one will offer a price—"

"I'll say three hundred," said one.

"Three fifty!"

"Four!"

"Five hundred dollars!"

"Five fifty!"

It was much money for cattlemen to pay for a horse, but Lee Haines knew that they were bidding for a smile from the girl, not for the horse itself. And though yonder in the jail was a man to whom he owed his life and for whom he would have laid down his own safety, yet he knew that if he had the money in his pocket he would have joined the most enthusiastic bidders. The mere cow-punchers had drawn away a little, hopeless when they saw such money offered. It was only the ranchers who were calling now.

But the voice of Joan halted them, saying: "Five hundred is what I need. Who offered that?"

"I!" came the shout, and there were six voices in it.

She shook her head, bewildered.

"Who offered it?" she asked.

"I offered it," said Jud Carter, pushing his gaunt form through the crowd.

"Then Peter is yours!"

There was a shout of protest from the others.

"He was up for the highest bidder, lady! You got to sell him that way."

"But five hundred," she argued, "is all that I need—poor Peter! Good boy!"

A wave of grief called her attention from the men to the horse beside her, and the demands of the higher bidders were as suddenly forgotten.

"And here," said Jud Carter, climbing to her side, "is the coin. Lucky I had it handy with me!"

He removed his hat with a flourish, very conscious that he was making a picture which would be long remembered, and not at all aware that it would be remembered mostly because it was ridiculous in the contrast of the slender girl, graceful as music, with his bony, work-twisted body, as he leaned above her.

She took the money, rewarded poor Jud with a trembling smile, and then threw her arms around Peter. A gaping crowd saw the tears tumble out of her eyes, saw her lift his head and press her cheek against his muzzle, and then she was gone, while Peter turned and trotted after her, raising a cloud of dust from the veranda flooring.

Jud Carter by a burst of sprinting, captured the horse and led him down to the ground, and there he was surrounded by a clamorous crowd, laughing, roaring out a hundred comments.

But Joan had hurried straight down the street with a step as free and athletic as the stride of a boy. And so she came to the courthouse and the city hall, combined in one wide, low-fronted building. From the old pensioner at the door she asked the way to Judge Conley's office, and the ancient unkinked his back and strode grinning beside her until he had brought her to the sanctum of the judge himself.

"They are all kind," thought Joan as she entered the office of the judge. "All these men are so gentle, I wonder why my mother wanted to keep me away from them? Why could it be?"

So she stood in front of Judge Conley who, as he turned in his swivel chair, was encountered by the eloquent wink of the old man who was just closing the door. Therefore, the judge, to cover a responsive grin, had to frown and clear his throat, a proceeding which made Joan back a step away.

He seated her in another moment, however. And when all the wrinkles were out of his forehead, it seemed to Joan that he was like all the rest of his kind—overflowing with good-nature and eagerness to help her. And as he drew the chair out of

the shaft of sunshine and waved her into it, he remained leaning over it with one hand rested on the arm.

It brought him so close to Joan that she had to lean farther back in the chair to smile up at him. But smile she did, although there was a wild riot of fear and hope and grief—for Peter—in her heart. For she was beginning to find that smiles worked wonderfully well with men. A smile struck a light into their eyes, made them alert, suppled the very joints of their limbs.

So it was with the judge now. He beamed down upon her, a veritable rain of good will.

"And what's the trouble now?" he asked. "What's the trouble, since nothing but trouble brings people to me? Let's start right in with your name and then we'll go through with the rest of the story."

"Joan Daniels," she answered.

The judge recoiled, struck the back of his knees against the edge of his swivel chair, and sat down heavily within it. The force jogged the spectacles low on his chin, and the knowledge that he had appeared ungraceful made him scowl to recover his lost ground.

"Ah," said he, "then you're the one that I've heard of—that lives all by herself with a silent man for a father? Well, well! I've heard a good deal about you!"

She shook her head, saying that she did not know who could have talked about her, because she knew no one, but she had heard that he was the man to whom one came when one whished to pay a bail.

"A bail!" exclaimed the judge, starting in his chair, and then rocking far back in it until his short legs swung clear of the floor. "Bail? Who the devil—I mean, what bail do you want to pay?"

His violence drove some of the color out of Joan's cheeks, and as she stared at him, he sat forward again and managed to reach out and pat her hand.

"There, there," he said. "I didn't mean to frighten you. Whose bail do you want to pay?"

She swallowed.

"There is a man who was arrested last night. I think he's called Sandy Williams—"

She saw the face of the judge darken.

"My dear—Miss Daniels," said the judge, "what interested you in him?"

"I can't tell you that," she admitted. "But here I have the money to pay—the whole five hundred, you see!"

And she leaned forward, her eyes bright with delight. The judge, however, paid not the slightest heed to the money. Instead, he picked up a yellow telegraph slip from the desk beside him and extended it toward her.

"I don't know what you know about the man who calls himself Sandy Williams. But no matter whatever else you know about him, I imagine that you don't know this—and you ought to!"

She looked down to the slip of paper and saw typewritten across it in capitals:

> HOLD SANDY WILLIAMS UNTIL MY ARRIVAL. HIS REAL NAME, HARRY GLOSTER, WANTED HERE FOR MURDER OF HAL SPRINGER AND RUDY NICHOLS LAST WEEK. TWO THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD WILL BE PAID TO—

The brief remainder danced into a smudge of black.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

A RAINBOW

A RAINBOW is a bow that's bent so far
I almost fear that it will break apart;
And when I wonder where the arrows are,
I feel one strike my heart.

Mary Carolyn Davies.

Dan Barry's Daughter

By MAX BRAND

Author of "The Night Horseman," "Black Jack," "The Seventh Man," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II.

JOAN, eighteen-year-old beauty who believes herself to be the daughter of Buck Daniels, ranchman, has been zealously guarded by him against the world of young men. This night she hears the call of migrating wild geese, and under the ripe moon she secretly rides away from the ranch house to eavesdrop enviously at a country dance in the schoolhouse. Near by she encounters a tall, broad shouldered youth, and in words and song flirts delicately with him in the darkness. When he tries to learn her identity she flees. Interwoven with this shining promise of romance are the grim threads of tragedy wherein two inoffensive men perish at the hands of a cutthroat, and an innocent man becomes a fugitive because of circumstantial evidence against him. Harry Gloster, this fugitive and wooer of a shadowy beauty, returns to the dance and, manlike, pays extravagant attentions to one of the local belles. Her beau and a half dozen of his cow-puncher friends attempt to chastise Gloster, but he outfights them and is about to dash away when the sheriff arrests him on suspicion. Joan auctions off her prize mustang to go on Gloster's bail bond, but a telegram comes to the authorities to hold him for the murder of two men.

CHAPTER XIII.

THROWING DICE WITH DEATH.

NOW that the girl was gone, the center of attention was the horse. And with the horse was unlucky Jud Carter as the cynosure of all eyes.

"And what," said some one, "d'you aim to do with that hoss, Jud?"

"Why," announced Jud, still somewhat crestfallen over the sudden disappearance of the girl, but his eye brightening as he looked over the racy lines of Peter, "I reckon that I can use him well enough. Couldn't you?"

"Maybe I could," said the other, "but I dunno that I would."

"What might you be meaning by that?"

"Why d'you think that most of the gents were bidding in on that hoss?"

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for June 30.

"Why—I dunno—"

"Ain't it true that there ain't a man here that would want to pay five hundred for one hoss when he could get five hosses that 'd be good to work cattle with?"

"Maybe that's true."

"Then why did they all bid up?"

"Why—matter of fact—"

"Matter of fact, they were just trying to help that girl out of the trouble that made her need five hundred dollars."

Jud came from a thrifty family. He looked about him in amazement.

"You mean to say that they wanted to *give* away five hundred?"

"No," was the response; "because they figured that it was worth that much to get an introduction to the girl."

Jud Carter passed a work hardened hand across his forehead. But before his wits had cleared after this argument, and while he was still surrounded by men who were striving to show him an impossible point of view, he was removed from his difficulties by a new intervention.

For Joan herself came slowly down the street and through the crowd and went straight to Jud. She carried in her hand, still, the same money which he had given her. And coming to him, she looked up in his face with great, fear stricken, wistful eyes.

"Do you think," she asked, "that I could buy Peter back from you for just as much as you paid? Here is the same money, you see!"

It was the smile from heaven for Jud. He had been swept off his feet a little before —with all of the others around him—but the thought of losing five hundred dollars or the respect of the community had sobered his close figuring brain completely. His throat closed so tight that he could only reach for the money with one hand and gesture to Peter with the other.

All in an instant Joan had given a faint cry of joy and was back in the saddle. A twitch of the reins and Peter was through the midst of them. A word and he was kicking the dust behind him as he galloped down the street.

As for those who had done the bidding for Peter a little while before, they glanced after her with the wistful eyes of youth, seeing that one has only to turn the corner with any man in order to find him in his boyhood again. But while they were still gaping and had not said a word, news came hobbling out to them in the form of the old man who was the office boy, janitor, and all around messenger of the courthouse, with more knowledge about each office in the old building than had the very tenants themselves.

It was he who now spread the word. How he knew no one could guess, for Judge Conley had certainly not told him. But perhaps the walls in that building were overly thin, or else keyholes were overly large. At any rate, he bore tidings of everything—of how the girl had come with five hundred dollars bail to get Sandy Williams free; and of how the judge had placed before her a telegram announcing that Williams was no other than a certain Harry Gloster, who had killed two men a week before, and therefore he was not open to bail of any amount.

This was the news which sent a buzz of wonder through the town. It was a salve for the battered jaws and the sore ribs of the men who had stood up to Harry Gloster the night before and found themselves going down like nine pins. For, after all, a man who was capable of a double murder was capable of almost anything.

But the only one who felt no thrill of excitement was Lee Haines. For when he heard the news it seemed as though a weight had fallen upon his shoulders, bowing him, and that a shadow had dropped across his eyes.

At any rate, he went slowly, slowly back to the hotel, rented his room for another day, and when in the room he first of all carefully removed the bandage from his right hand. That hand was stiff, and the ragged wound in the palm was still unhealed.

But, making a grimace from the pain it caused him, he began to open and shut the fingers. A few drops of blood oozed out as he continued, but he kept working until the hand was supple.

After that, to rest the aching nerves of the hand, he lay on his back on the

bed and ran his eyes over the cracks on the ceiling, and for every branching and turning of the long cracks above him he found branchings and turnings in his own life. He could read them as if they were notes to freshen his memory and bring up to his mind all that ever he had done or seen.

And he had done too much; he had seen too much. So that from time to time he would close his eyes and relax, outworn by the effort, and at such times, his face relaxing, the flesh about his mouth and under his eyes sank in a little so that his face was like a death mask—or like death itself.

The day sloped into the quiet and the shadow of the evening. When he was aware of the incessant beat and metal hammering in the blacksmith shop by its cessation; when the subdued voices which had gone on all the day were hushed away, and there were single calls from children in the street or bursts of laughter from a group of merrymakers, then he sat up on the bed, slowly, and leaned his head in his hand.

There he sat until the darkness was complete. And when he began to move again it was with such a faltering slowness that indeed he seemed a feeble old fellow who has lived out the appointed threescore and ten, instead of a burly and vigorous man in the latter prime of life.

However, what he was doing had a significance which was young enough. He was looking to his revolver. And he was looking to it in the utter blackness of the dark!

His fingers seemed to have eyes for that work. They worked swiftly, and yet were unhurried. The big weapon was first unloaded, and then it was taken apart all in the dark, and all in the dark it was reassembled, the shells inserted again, and the cylinder was spun. And the action was as smooth as silk.

If any one could have watched, they would have wondered not so much at the thing that was done, but that any man would have spent all the countless hours that must have been required in practice before he could have become so familiar with all the parts of a revolver that he would know each by the touch. But such, however, was the skill of Lee Haines, and the fact that he had such a skill threw a sharp light down his past.

When his gun was ready and loaded once more he was still not ready. He lighted a lamp, drew his shade, and spent an hour in a strange practice, which consisted of jerking the gun from the holster on his thigh with lightning speed and leveling it at some object in the room, which might be the knob of the door or the high light which lay along the rim of the bowl on the washstand. Then he began to walk softly to and fro in the room, and when the impulse moved him he jerked out his weapon and whirled, aiming it again.

They were adroit movements, but always they appeared to disappoint Haines. And finally he went to the stained and cracked mirror, and, holding the lamp above his head, he examined his face with a care which plainly showed that he considered himself an old man.

After he set down the lamp he clapped a hat on his head, however, and went straight down the stairs to the rear of the hotel, and thence to the stable which was behind it. There he entered a stall in which was a great black stallion, a giant of his kind, yet built for speed as well as strength. In the days of old he could have galloped at high speed with all the crushing impost of a knight in full armor upon his back.

Even the solid bulk of so big a man as Lee Haines would be nothing to his strength. He could trot along all day, just as a range mustang could trot under the burden of an ordinary man. He saddled the great black horse, arranged the pack behind the saddle, all with the consummate care of one who knows that little details count most in big affairs, and then led the spirited animal out and mounted.

His journey led straight down the street of the village where the greatest number of eyes would fall upon him, but he moment he was clear of the outskirts of the town he turned to the left and made a swift semicircle which brought him back to the vicinity of the jail. Here he dismounted.

There was a thicket behind the building.

It had been cleared away for ten paces, but after this the brush was thick and high enough to hide a mounted man. Here he threw the reins of the black horse and dismounted; and as he did so he heard a girl's voice singing not far away a Mexican waltz song:

> "Que viva la rumba;
> Que viva, que viva placer."

He listened to the singing for a moment. There was something so joyous and careless in it that it made his mood of the moment darker than ever. She might be still singing, this happy passer-by, when guns were sounding in the jail.

After that he went forward again, circled the building, and came to the front entrance. It was surrounded by a group of men talking idly of idle things, but there was no doubt that they had been drawn there by the knowledge that a murderer was inside.

The door to the office was open, and in it were Sim Hargess and his deputy, with a half dozen others. Lee Haines picked Hargess from the rest and drew him to one side.

"Sheriff," he said, "I have something of importance to tell you. It has to do with your man, Harry Gloster, inside."

"Let's have it, then."

"Rather have you alone when I tell it."

The sheriff regarded him for a moment of doubt, then he sent the others from the room and shut the door behind them.

"I guess you got no objections to George staying?" he said.

"I'd rather have you alone, sheriff."

Again the sheriff hesitated. But eventually, with a shrug, he bade George follow the others.

"Mind if I lock the door behind him?" asked Haines, doing the thing before he received an answer.

"What the devil!" growled Hargess. "You afraid that they'll break in to hear what you have to say?"

"They'd spoil everything for me," answered Haines seriously, "if they should hear. Sit down, sheriff. It won't take me long once I'm started to—"

He stepped to a chair as he spoke, and the sheriff leaned to be seated, but as he did so his eyes caught on a glint of metal. He cursed softly and straightened again, staring into the muzzle of Haines's revolver.

"Very neat, damn you!" he said bitterly.

"Sorry, sheriff. But put them up quick. I'm pressed for time even with the door locked."

The sheriff raised his hands obediently.

"The keys?" demanded Haines.

"On the desk there."

"Thanks. What horse is that tied behind the jail?"

"Mine."

"Going to have to borrow that roan, sheriff. Return him to you when I get a chance."

"You'll sweat for this one of these days."

"Most likely I shall. Step inside, will you?"

He waved to the jail entrance, and Sim Hargess obediently led the way. Obedience was in his manner, but not in his mind, however, for as he stepped through the door into the cell room he leaped to the side of the door with a shout and drew his revolver as he whirled.

It took Lee Haines by surprise. Otherwise there would have been no time for even the shout. But as it was, he tapped the sheriff over the head with the long barreled weapon which he carried. The sheriff dropped on his face, as loosely sprawling as if a ten ton wagon had rolled over him.

Outside the building there was an answering yell of inquiry from Deputy George. At the door it was taken up by the clamor of a dozen voices.

CHAPTER XIV.

FREEDOM HAS ITS SHACKLES.

THAT calling transformed the leisurely movements of Haines into wild haste. He leaned to scoop up the gun which was still clasped by the unnerved fingers of the sheriff; then he raced down the aisle to the cell of Harry Gloster.

"Harry!" he called as he ran. "We're

leaving together. Take this!" He tossed the revolver to him. "Now if I can find the key that fits this damned door—"

He began to work feverishly, groaning as every key failed to fit the lock. Gloster had merely scooped up his hat and placed it on his head, completing his readiness to leave. Now he took the revolver, spun it in his hand. and then tossed it onto his bunk.

"I'll leave this where it 'll do no harm," he said. "A gun like that is apt to do a lot of killing if a man doesn't look out."

Haines favored him and the discarded weapon with a glance of rapt wonder.

"That's a fool's idea!" he declared. "But—" Here the lock turned and the door was cast open by Gloster's shoulder.

"Now for the rear door!" cried Haines. "Right outside the sheriff's horse is tied. Jump into the saddle. I'll cut the reins loose. Fast, Gloster, for God's sake!"

Down the sides of the building ran voices, and at the front door there was a furious battering. And far away, up and down the village street, they could hear the shouts and the beating of hoofs as men, attracted by the clamor at the jail, threw themselves into the saddle and scurried for the scene of action.

The two inside reached the rear door, twisted at the knob, and found it locked. It meant another search among the keys, and such a search meant a delay which would render all escape hopeless.

Haines, with a groan, started to fit the keys, however—since even hopeless work is better than inaction—but Gloster warned him away, and as he stepped aside a human battering ram went past him and hurled itself against the door.

It was a stout door. The safety of the cells depended on the tool-proof steel of the bars, alone, but nevertheless, all the approaches to the building were strongly blocked. And now the door flung back the heavy body of Gloster as if he were a rubber ball. He staggered away, found footing once more, and returned to the charge, shooting straight ahead, then swerving at the last instant and giving the wood the rubbery mass of muscle on his shoulders as a pad for his weight.

The shock cracked the lock as if it were castiron. The door flew open and spilled Gloster into the outer night where he was welcomed by a yell from half a dozen throats.

Lee Haines jumped out to join the fracas, his deadly long revolver poised. But Gloster arose from the shadow at his feet, where he had falen, and struck the weapon out of his hand.

"No shooting for me!" he commanded, and lunged at the sheriff's roan horse.

As for Haines, with an oath of helpless anger, he stooped, caught up his fallen gun, and arose to find some one running straight on him, firing at every step. No doubt it was the jar of his own running that ruined the aim of the oncomer.

But Haines had no time to find the trigger of his own weapon. He had seized it by the barrel, and now he dashed the heavy butt into the face of his assailant. The man went down with a gasp, and Haines turned toward Gloster long enough to see that the other was hopelessly lost.

Three men had thrown themselves upon him as he was wrenching apart the reins that tethered the roan. And Haines gave up a lost cause and raced for the shelter of the bush.

He was neglected for the instant, as all the rest were focusing on Gloster, and Lee ventured a glance back from the shubbery.

What he saw was Gloster rising out of a cluster of men as a dog shakes himself free from a scrambling, weak-toothed litter of puppies. One of the three was prostrate, a second went down at that instant as if struck with a club; the third staggered away, and then, encouraged by the yells of a solid group which was charging to his assistance, dived in again to the attack.

Haines saw him picked up, heaved into the air as if he were no more than the fragile body of a child, and then flung into the faces of the onrushing men. The leaders went down under the blow. Those behind them were entangled, and before the tangle cleared, Gloster was on the back of the roan and dashing for the crowded shadows of the shubbery.

He plunged past Haines, three steps away, and was gone with a crash among

the young trees. On the scene of the battle, men were picking themselves up, cursing brokenly. A roar of guns followed, the bullets rattling through the brush, and Gloster called hastily: "Haines! Haines! For God's sake, where are you?"

He reined in his horse, heedless of the bullets which were whistling near him. But there was no answer from Haines.

Instead, a slenderer and smaller figure now rushed a horse out of the darkness where he had expected to see the other man come to join. He jerked his horse around and charged the newcomer to strike him to the ground.

But the latter dodged, with a horse as slippery as an eel. And, the next instant, a girl's voice was crying to him: "Follow me! This way! Ride hard!"

Amazement engulfed him, and then he rode as fast as the sheriff's horse would take him, in pursuit of the girl. She led him straight at a thick, low copse. But when he half expected to see her and her horse come to ruin in the wall of brush, they suddenly ducked out of sight in it.

And, at the very verge of the thicket, he saw a narrow opening which twisted to the left, made by grazing cattle, perhaps, breaking a path through to come at nearby water. He reined back the roan and wound through the brush at a more moderate pace, coming out on the farther side into a little hollow which pointed down a shallow arroyo. And in the hollow was the girl, waiting for him.

"You've gained on them!" she cried, clapping her hands together in her delight. "They'll have to ride around the thicket to come on your trail again. Ride fast—ride hard! Or if you stay at all, only stay to take my horse. There's nothing in the country that can come up with him for running—"

He could not believe his ears. Beyond the thicket, men were shouting, men were riding here and there, baffled by his disappearance. These were precious moments to put a distance between himself and them. But instead of taking her advice, he pressed closer to her and peered down into her face. The starlight was bright—bright enough to give him a thousand hints of her beauty, and yet so dim that a shadow still lay across her features.

"You're the girl," he said. "I knew that voice as well as though I'd heard you singing the song—"

"Don't stop to talk!" she cried. "Be gone at once. Don't you hear them? Don't you hear them?"

In fact, the noise of horses and of shouting was spreading, behind them, to either edge of the thicket, and before long the riders would swarm out into the arroyo.

"I can't leave till I know your name."

"Joan. Joan Daniels. Now — quickly—"

"I'm not going yet. What brought you here?"

"I don't know, except that something was telling me that perhaps"—she broke off to say, pressing closer to him and putting a hand on his arm—"the two men they say you killed—"

"I never laid a hand on them. They were my partners, Joan. I came back from hunting. I found them dead, and I ran for it, because I knew that I didn't have any defense—"

"I knew you couldn't have done it. I knew that, but I wanted to hear what—"

"I've been trying to draw your face, Joan, but everything that I've imagined has been wrong. You're a thousand times more beautiful. I'd give a year of life to see you only once in the sunlight—"

"You mustn't talk of that! Don't you hear them coming? Don't you hear them riding around the thicket?"

The hand on his arm trembled. He took it in both his own, and as he drew her a little nearer, she raised her head and looked steadily up into his face. The noise of the riders faded from his mind.

"What is your hair, Joan? In the starlight it looks only like a pale glow of light. Is it gold?"

"It's yellow hair," she said.

"It's metal gold," he answered. "And what color are your eyes, Joan?"

"Blue. Now go, Harry, for God's sake, go!"

"You're not happy with me here?"

"So happy it's like sadness. Oh, being near you is a wild happiness! And when

I touch you, it's as though I took all of your strength into my hand."

"And when I touch you, Joan, I feel as if I'd taken the blue out of the sky and all the gold out of the mountains, and all the laughing and the singing out of the world."

"Hush!" she pleaded. "If you say such things, I'll be begging you to stay. And now they come—oh, don't you see?"

"What do I care? I'm living a year every second. I've spent a whole life of happiness right here trying to tell you how much I love you, Joan. But the words don't tell you what I mean."

"Then for my sake go!"

"Ask me again, Joan."

"For my sake."

"And you care for me—just a little to begin with?"

"Yes!"

"Then—" He took her in his arms, but with her face raised to his, something weakened and snapped in him. And in her face and her eyes he found a solemn power which kept him from touching her with his lips.

Another moment and he was spurring away for freedom.

CHAPTER XV.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW.

IT was just as Gloster plunged into the wood near the jail that a bullet struck Haines. And there was a sting of irony that went almost as deep as the plunging bullet in the knowledge that he was struck by a random shot. After the thousand dangers he had faced, to be killed by accident—

He thought of all that as he sagged against a tree trunk, watching with dim eyes the shadowy horsemen who were racing through the wood in the pursuit of the escaped man. Then, as he strove to get to the black stallion, his foot caught. He fell heavily and struck the side of his head against a stump.

He lay only a few moments on the ground, but it seemed to him an enternity. He was faint and weak when his eyes opened again, and the roar of voices in the town and about the jail had grown into a heavy chorus.

He felt of the blood which trickled from his wounds where the bullet had entered and left his body, and he knew that he was indeed no better than a dead man. What he wanted most of all was to get into the open, lie flat on his back and, watching the cold stars grow dim, so die. If only he could find water in the sands, for a fire of thirst was burning in him, closing his dry throat.

Stumbling on in this fashion through the wood, with shadows already swinging before his eyes, he ran against a projecting branch, a stiff and strong-tipped bough which cut against the wound. He clapped his hand over the place, felt the blood gush, and staggered weakly on toward the black horse.

The stallion remained honestly where he had been placed, but his low neigh of greeting came faint and far to Lee. He reached for the pommel and then found that he would never have the strength to pull himself into the saddle.

"Lee Haines!" some one was calling.

"Not he!" answered Haines, staggering as he turned. "Not Haines, Gloster. Come get me, and be damned to you—"

And then his misting eyes saw that it was only a girl who stood before him, and he knew that it was a girl's voice that had spoken.

"It *is* Haines!" she was crying eagerly.

"Where's Gloster?"

"He's gone as fast as a fast horse can take him away."

"Thank God!"

They were interrupted by a rushing of men and horses through the brush, and the clamor of a score of voices calling. Already the light cavalry of the town had swept into the pursuit; others were following. A cluster plunged past the girl and Haines not a dozen feet away. But they were looking for moving figures, and these stationary shadows remained unseen.

"Why aren't you riding?" she asked.

"Riding?" Haines echoed. "I'll go as far as water and stay there. Is there water near here—"

He coughed, and the excruciating pain stopped his voice. She stepped close to him, and as the agony abated a little, he could see that it was the girl who had sold Peter that day and bought him back again.

"You're wounded—badly," she was saying.

"I'm nicked—nothing bad. If you can tell me where there's water and—"

He stumbled and would have fallen, but her shoulder caught under his, and held him strongly up. She drew one of his dangling arms around her neck. Her right arm she passed around him, and now half his weight slumped lifelessly upon her.

"Try to walk—slowly!" she gasped, and they staggered on through the darkness.

"Doesn't amount to anything," she heard him say. "I'll just tie up the place they nicked me—be all right in a minute and—you go along about your business—nobody must find you with me—"

But no matter how bravely he talked, she saw that his head had fallen far forword so that he was blinded to the way they went, and every moment the weight she was carrying increased. There was a wild fear in her. She felt that at any moment it might overtake her and paralyze her. And so she fought it back savagely and centered all her mind on the need of the big man whose weight was lurching to and fro against her.

She had seen an old cabin, more than half ruined, which stood among the trees, and to this she now led Lee Haines. He was barely past the door when he slumped down, his weight tearing away from her gripping hands, while he murmured: "I'll just sit down here to rest a minute. Be all right—you run along now—"

His weakening voice and his fall told her a thousand things more than his words.

"Have you a match?" she cried. "Oh, quickly!"

"Here's one. Did I hear water running some place near?"

She took the box of matches from his hand. It was always that way, she understood, with men who had been badly wounded. A torturing thirst burned in them.

She struck a light and looked anxiously around her. The cabin was a wreck indeed. There was no flooring. Half of the roof had caved in under the weight of a falling branch which thrust a great cluster of dead boughs and twigs into the building. Red rust was eating the remnants of an iron stove to dust in a corner.

In another space there was a bunk built against the wall: It must have been two or more years since the place was inhabited, yet by the bunk stood a singularly vivid memento of the man who had once dwelt here. It was a candlestick with a short section of time-yellowed candle still in it.

Here her match burned out. With a second one she lighted the candle.

"Not too much light!" Haines gasped. "I want to die away from 'em. I don't want them around me yapping and asking questions. Put something around it. And a little water—"

His voice was cut away by another cough and she saw his big limbs contracted by a spasm of agony. No doubt that wound was grimly serious, but water seemed to her the most crying need.

Not ten steps from the door she found the pump, still used by random passers-by, it appeared, for it was primed. She filled Haines's canteen with clear, cool water and brought it back to him.

He caught it with a great shaking hand that spilled half the contents down his breast. She had to hold it for him and his eyes made her shudder. They were like the tortured eyes of a dumb beast dying in agony. But this creature who lay mute was a man!

After that she looked to his wound. His whole right side was adrip with blood, and when she cut away the shirt with his own knife, she saw a purple rimmed hole—

Blackness swam across her eyes. Then she got swaying to her feet.

"I'll have a doctor here in one minute—"

He shook his head with such an expression of earnest entreaty in his face that she paused.

"All this needs is to be plugged—to stop bleeding. After that, I'll be all right—"

"You can't be sure! And when I see it—"

"I know. You've never seen a fellow clipped with a slug before. But this is nothing. Leaves you weak for a little while. After that, when the blood stops running—a man is all right. I'll be walking around in an hour!"

She studied his face anxiously, but he smiled back at her, and she dropped to her knees beside him.

"Then tell me what to do. Tell me how to help you!"

"If I had a pad of cloth—"

She turned from him, ripped away her underskirt, and tore it into strips. He followed her movements, nodding with a sort of weak admiration.

"Very strong for a girl," he said. "*Very* strong! Never would dream it from the size of your wrist."

She wondered that he could say such things; but after all she decided that he must be very familiar with wounds and must know that this one was not deadly. She made pads of the cloth.

With his own hands he placed those pads over the wound behind and the wound in front. Then she tied the bandage around him, drawing it to such a point of tightness as he demanded.

After that, he wanted water again. She brought it, and again held the canteen to his lips.

Some of the pain was gone from his eyes, now. And in its place there was a shadow like sleepiness, very like it!

She was rejoiced when he smiled faintly at her, and in her happiness, smiling back to him, she took one of his hands and cherished it between both her own.

CHAPTER XVI.

EYES THAT SAW NOT.

IT appeared to her that he was growing momentarily older and older, that his cheeks were thinner and that his eyes were sinking into a shadow, while a pale circle came around his mouth. His lips seemed tinted with blue.

"You're sure that this is the right thing to do—that there's no danger?" she asked.

"Not a bit."

"What can I do now?"

"Go home and go to bed and forget that you saw me."

"Do you really want me to do that?"

"Of course. You mustn't be found with me."

"But who'll take care of you?"

"I'll be away in half an hour."

"Away?"

"On my horse, I mean."

"You couldn't possibly ride, after being so hurt."

"You don't know. I've been sliced up worse than this before. This is an old, old story!"

She hesitated, but at last she shook her head with conviction.

"I won't say a word if you don't want to be bothered," she assured him. "But I want to stay here to try to make you comfortable. For instance, don't you want something under your head?"

And taking off her jacket, she rolled it and placed it under his head. Whatever his words had been, he accepted her ministrations. And looking down into his eyes as she leaned above him, it seemed to her that they were bottomless wells of gratitude.

"That's good," he whispered to her. "But why are you doing these things for me?"

"You risked yourself to save another man," she explained. "Isn't it right that I should help you?"

"Is Gloster your brother?"

"Oh, no;"

"Ah," nodded Haines. "I see how it is! Poor girl, you're engaged to Harry."

"But I'm not, you know."

"What!"

"He's never even seen me."

He stared blankly at her.

"Well," he said, "I'll ask no questions. And no matter what's against Gloster, he's a man. As for what I've done for him, it's nothing. He's already done as much for me. Hand and hand about, you know, that's the only way people can get on."

"He's helped you? Tell me about that!"

He smiled at her eagerness, with that sleepy shadow, as she thought it, gradually deepening in his eyes.

"An enemy of mine found me when I had this hand bandaged the other day."

He exposed that hand, with blood crusted on the palm from the use of his revolver. The friction of the butt must have caused him exquisite pain, and the girl shuddered at the raw-edged wound.

"It was about to be my finish," went on Lee Haines, "but Harry Gloster stepped in between me and the other fellow's gun."

He paused and then added softly: "Never had met me before—never heard of me—hadn't talked with me five minutes—but he jumped right in between me and a fellow who can make a revolver talk seven languages. Gloster hit twice, and that ended the fight. Bare handed work against a revolver. It was a pretty fine thing!"

"But just like him!" cried the girl.

"I thought you didn't know him?"

"I've seen him."

"And having seen him, you know all about him?"

Suddenly he reached for her hand, found it, and drew it close to his breast. And the fingers which touched hers she thought colder than running water.

"My dear," said Haines, "I once knew a girl that was in love with a fellow like Gloster. No, he was really like nobody in the world. But like Gloster, the law made no difference to him. Will you let me tell you what happened to her?"

She nodded.

"She looked like you. That's what put it into my head. She had the same sort of metal gold hair and the same kind of blue eyes. Mind you, she was still as different from you as Gloster is from the man she loved.

"She was very quiet; very gentle; and to see her, you'd wonder how any man—or woman either, for that matter—could bear to make her suffer. But the man she loved—well, to tell you the short of it, he tortured her!"

"Oh," murmured Joan. "How terrible! If a man were so cruel to be—no matter how I loved him—"

"What would you do?"

"I'd leave him, even if my heart were to break."

"Ah, but you see, as I said before, you're quite different from Kate Cumberland."

"Was that her name?"

"Yes."

"Kate was my mother's name," mused the girl. "But won't you tell me what happened?"

"Yes. Dan Barry was the man she loved—but I suppose you've never heard of him?"

"Never."

"There was a time when I thought everyone in the world would know about him sooner or later. Just what he was, I don't know. Nobody knows. He was simply different.

"Old Joe Cumberland, the squarest old rancher that ever lived, was riding about sunset time, one day, and he heard a queer whistling on the brow of a hill. He rode up there and he saw a boy—just a youngster—bare legged and dressed in rags—walking along with his head back, watching the wild geese flying north and whistling up at them."

"Ah?" murmured the girl, and she leaned forward, pushing the candle closer, as though its light on the face of the man might help her to understand his story.

"Joe took the youngster home and raised him. Had a hard time. Dan Barry—he gave that for his name—didn't seem to know where his mother or his father was. And when he was asked where he came from, he simply waved a hand at the southern horizon. And when he was asked where he was going and why, he didn't know. He tried to run away at first, but when he was always caught, he gave it up. Finally he seemed to be quite happy.

"But he was different from other people. He was as quiet as a girl, most of the time. But when he was stirred up, he turned into a fighting devil. A fighting devil," repeated Haines with a sort of religious awe. "And when he fought, though he wasn't a big man, he had the strength of half a dozen men. Imagine a hundred and fifty pound wildcat, you see?

"Cumberland had seen him in a couple of passions when he was a youngster, and he made up his mind that the only way to keep Dan from getting into trouble was to

keep guns out of his hands when he was around other men. He'd let him hunt as much as he pleased, but he never let him wear a gun when he was going to town.

"And Barry lived mostly in the mountains—mighty little at home. He came back with a wounded wolf one day. Barry called it a dog. But he was the ringer of a black-coated wolf, and a mighty big one.

"That was the 'dog' that Dan called Black Bart. It was danger on four paws. that wolf. Ready to tear the heart out of any other man and ready to die for Dan.

"Another time he came back with a black stallion, the finest I ever saw. I have a fine horse of my own and it happens to be black, but the Captain isn't worth one of Satan's hoofs. And yet for all that I've never found a horse that could pass the Captain or outlast him.

"But the point of it was that Satan kept the strength of anything that is wild and free. You see? He served Dan, but he served him for love, you might say. Can you understand the difference? There *is* a difference.

"It took me a year to teach the Captain that it didn't pay to buck even if he threw me off, now and then. Now he lets me ride him, but he's waiting to get me at a disadvantage and tear me to bits."

"Why do you keep him?"

Because he's the best horse in the mountains. That's one reason. Another is that I think he's one of Satan's colts. I got him when he was a yearling, and he was in the mustang band that old Satan was still leading. Some of the old blood runs in him. And if he had another Dan Barry on his back—how can I tell?—he might be every bit as good as his father ever was!

"But to get back to Barry himself, I say he used to go around the country on the back of a horse he didn't need a bridle to handle and with a wolf trailing him and doing his errands—"

"How wonderful!" cried the girl; "oh, how wonderful!"

"You think so? A little bit terrible you would have found it, too, if you had seen them as I have seen them. I've watched them play a game, all three of them. Mind you, this was when they thought they were quite unwatched.

"Satan would trot away to a little distance. Then Black Bart attacked Dan—like a demon, with his fur bristling and his great teeth slashing the air a hair's breadth from Dan's face, who would fend the brute off with his hands, dancing here and there like the shadow of a leaf in a whirlpool of wind.

"And Satan would come to the rescue with the sun winking on him, and his mane blowing above his head; just a fraction of a second's pause at the scene of the fight—and then Dan had dived at him, caught him in some way around the neck and then twisted on to his back. So off they would go with Black Bart after them, sailing through the air with his teeth aimed at Dan's throat—imagine catching a hundred and thirty pound wolf coming at you like an arrow with his own speed plus the speed of a racing horse! But that's what Dan Barry would do, and off they would go with Satan carrying both of them and thinking nothing whatever about it!"

"Ah," murmured the girl, "how beautiful and how free! Such a man could do no wrong!"

"Let me tell you what he did. I've been saying all this just to work up to the point. He married beautiful Kate Cumberland. He settled down. He forgot his wildness. They had a youngster. Mind you, I say that he forgot his wildness. Rather I should say that he kept putting the impulses behind him. But finally they broke loose again. Seven men chased him. Seven men killed the horse he was riding—it wasn't Satan—and Dan started to get the seven, one by one. He forgot Kate. He forgot the youngster. He went on a blood trail—"

"Why not?" cried the girl. "If Peter were killed—"

"But for the sake of a borrowed horse—to kill six men? That was why Kate left him. She still loved him, but she saw that she could not stay with him on account of their little girl.

"You see, Dan was willing to leave, but he couldn't bear to let the little girl stay behind him. And that wildness was

beginning to show in the youngster. It drove her mother frantic with fear to see it; and finally, while she was sitting in their cabin one night, she heard a whistling out in the night and she saw the little girl get up from the fire and cross the room and stand there with her baby face pressed against the glass and looking out into the night."

"She wanted to get to her father?"

"God knows! She'd have walked out into the teeth of wolves when she heard that whistle. And when Kate saw that look in the eyes of the baby, she knew—she knew—"

Here the voice of Lee Haines faltered and died away. The flame of the candle had leaped high and, pouring up a steady little stream of black smoke, it had rapidly eaten away the candle itself until now the fire was guttering, half inside the holder and half outside—so that the house was swept with alternate waves of light and shadow, and the only fixed point of illumination was a small circle on the ceiling.

It was in one of these passing shadows that Haines saw something in the face of the girl which shook his nerves. Or at least he thought he saw it; but when the flame spouted up again he changed his mind, only to see it once more when the shadow waved across them again.

"What's the matter?" she asked, frightened.

"Hold the candle higher!" he demanded.

She obeyed.

"Now," he said, his eyes great and shining as he watched her, "I was saying that the girl, when she heard her father's whistling, went to the window and looked out and then she tried to climb up on the sill—"

His voice stopped again, and it seemed to Joan that he watched her with a fascinated horror.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Joan Daniels," she answered; "but tell me more about Dan Barry. It seems to me—I don't know why—it pours me full of wonder, happiness, fear, to hear you speak of him."

"What Daniels?" Haines persisted.

"Buck Daniels."

"What? He wasn't married fifteen years ago. How could he have a daughter of your age?"

"Do you know him?"

He disregarded the question.

"Tell me about your mother."

"She looked a little like me. I mean, she had yellow hair and blue eyes."

"And her name—"

"I told you before—it was Kate."

He had raised himself, tensed with the effort. Now he sank back, supine, with his eyes closed. And Joan leaned anxiously above him.

"What's wrong? Are you worse?" she cried.

"Worse every minute," he said calmly, without opening his eyes.

"I'll get help—"

"Stay close to me, Joan. I've only a minute or two left. I knew when I had one look at the place that slug hit me that I was finished. I've seen too many wounds not to know. Don't go for help. The last thing I can do is to tell you a thing you ought to know."

She took his hands. By the force in her own young arms she seemed striving to drive new life into him.

"I saw it in your face," he murmured, "when the candle began to die—that same wild look I've seen in the face of your father—"

"Wild look—in dad's face?"

"Not Buck Daniels."

His next words were an obscure muttering. She leaned closer and she heard him saying:

"Dan Barry's girl was named Joan. His wife was named Kate, and you—"

He drew a great breath, and then his eyes fixed blankly upon the shattered roof of the cabin.

CHAPTER XVII.

HARE AND HOUNDS.

THE sheriff's roan was as trim a gelding as ever jogged across desert sands, and if it came to a dash over good going he had a turn of speed which would

make a rival sick in half a mile of work. So that, during the first ten minutes of his ride, Harry Gloster watched his progress with the utmost satisfaction and heard the noise of the pursuit beat away into the distance.

But he presently discovered that the roan was beginning to slacken his efforts. His gallop was losing its elasticity, and his fore hoofs struck the earth with a lifeless beat which meant a very great deal to the rider. He recalled the sheriff—a lean and sun withered man who might well be fifty pounds lighter than himself. Perhaps it was his weight which was killing the roan. Perhaps it was the great speed with which he had covered the first two miles out from the town. No doubt, both causes combined. But he presently was sure that he had killed the speed of the mount.

He drew to a walk and dropped out of the saddle. The instant he struck the ground he saw how much worse matters were than he had dreamed. He had to draw the roan along by the reins. The poor animal dragged back on the bit with dull eyes and flagging ears, and his hoofs trailed in the dust; and he got his wind back with amazing slowness.

For a blown horse is not like a blown man. Many a good athlete runs himself to a faint in a half mile race, lies ten minutes flat on his back, consciously relaxing every muscle, and then arises to run a mile event and win it. But when the ribs of a horse begin to heave in a certain manner, his flanks ballooning in and out, and when his head begins to jerk down at every stride, a rest of a few minutes does him little good.

The roan was not yet in this completely run out condition; he had something left, but it tortured Gloster to think of squeezing the last of life out of the beast.

He continued walking until a dull and muffled pounding was plainly audible behind him, and he knew that the pursuers were gaining fast. Then he brought the man to a trot and went forward at a smart clip, with the gelding beside him. Perhaps he covered a mile in this fashion, but by that time the noise from the rear was very distinct and he dared not linger any more.

In the meanwhile, although the roan was by no means recovered from the effects of that heavy weight in the saddle and the terrific pace of the first two miles, at least it was no longer pulling back on the bridle; and when Gloster, somewhat winded by his efforts on foot, climbed into the saddle again, the horse went off at a trot.

A trot, indeed, was all that could be reasonably managed in the soft silt of the desert. It was muffling the noise of those who came behind. But from what he heard, Gloster knew that they had spread out in a thin, long line, and were coming straight down his trail. They had heard his retreat over the harder ground nearer the town; and now he would be lucky indeed if he managed to get out of sight before the light of the dawn began.

An arroyo crossed his way. He dropped into it with a sigh of relief and raised the gelding to a gallop again. A moment later the dry ravine was filled with a clamoring as the whole posse swung in behind him, and, with the good footing beneath them, they gained upon him at an appalling rate.

Five minutes would see the finish of that race. No—less time than that. They were sweeping around a curve just behind and in ten seconds they would have full view of him. And a view by the clear starlight would be almost as good as a view in the day. Certainly they would open with their guns, and his own thigh was weighted by no revolver, to say nothing of a rifle under his leg.

He swung out of the saddle, balanced his weight on one stirrup for an instant, and then dropped to the ground. The tired gelding would have dropped back to a trot at once. The gentle beast even tried to halt and return to its late rider; but Gloster scooped out a handful of pebbles, sent the horse flying on with the force of them, and then threw himself back against the wall of the ravine.

He was plainly enough visible. The arroyo was not wide, and the stars were deadly bright. He could only hope that, by drawing the brim of his sombrero over his face, and flattening himself against the wall, he would not be seen as the front of the posse rolled by.

They came now, with three or four eager riders rushing in the lead and riding all the harder as they heard the beat of hoofs from their quarry so short a distance before them. These were no short winded sprinters, overburdened by riders of unusual weight. Every one was the favorite mount of the fellow who bestrode it. At least, so they appeared to Gloster; and they rode like avenging whirlwinds.

On they pushed, and then raised a yell, for down the cañon ahead of them the noise of the gelding's gallop had fallen away to a trot.

"Scatter, boys!" yelled the commanding voice of Sheriff Sim Hargess. He had recovered quickly from his hurt and joined in this work to revenge his disgrace. "That devil is slowin' up to fight. Shoot straight when you see him—"

His voice was blotted out by the roar of hoofs as the main body of the posse rode past. In a few more seconds they would find that he was not with the gelding; then a brief search as they scattered in all directions, and finally he must be taken back to prison, trussed up like a calf.

There were forty men in that group, and in the rear came two or three stragglers. One, it appeared, had fallen behind because something had gone wrong with his cinches. At any rate, he was now overtaking the main body hand over hand.

With a secret pang Gloster saw the wide shoulders of that horse working. With such a mount to carry him—

He leaped from his place with a shout. The racing horse, seeing this sudden apparition, snorted and, throwing back its weight, tried to swerve away. That was the moment that Gloster chose for leaping. In spite of its efforts to stop, the horse was dashing away at a smart pace, and the double impact of the speed of the horse and Gloster's leap was all transferred to the luckless rider.

He was smitten from his place as cleanly as any champion in the olden days picked an enemy out of the saddle in the lists and sent him crashing to the ground.

Down he went, and into his place in the saddle slipped Harry Gloster, with a new lease of life if he could take advantage of all the chances. But that would be no easy thing to do. To be sure, the whole posse had whirled past him; to be sure, they were now somewhat tangled in a mass farther down the arroyo, while the leaders were yelling that Gloster was not on the sheriff's roan, and some of the members were still pushing ahead, not having seen what happened to the rear.

But those horses were nearly all out of the great school of the cow ranges. They could turn on a ten cent piece, and it was nothing to weave a way through a crowd of horses, compared with working a calf out from the packed herd.

In their scrambling start Harry Gloster gained some thirty or forty lengths. He might have gained even more. But he had learned one lesson this night, and he was not apt to kill off his mount by too much sprinting in the beginning of a long run.

He saw a narrow cattle path going up the side of the arroyo. Up this he went. The posse stormed after him. They were far too impatient to go up the path one by one; so they crashed up the steep bank with plying spurs and many oaths. There were three falls and a thousand curses, but in a few seconds all were over the edge and headed into the plain beyond.

Nevertheless, they had taken more out of their horses in that brief group of seconds than in a mile of hard running. That handicap might balance the weight of Gloster in the saddle.

So, at least, he hoped. And after the next furious half mile, in which he barely managed to hold them even, his hopes increased. Some of them were using their guns, pumping shot after shot in his direction. But he did not mind this. There was hardly more than a chance in a thousand that a bullet would strike home from revolver fired at night from galloping horses. Even in the daylight he had seen many pounds of ammunition wasted in a similar fashion. Their shooting would simply make them ride slower.

For his own part, he was jockeying his horse with the utmost care, swaying with every stride, leaning to cut the pressure of the wind. Yet all would not do. They began to gain again. The firing stopped.

There was a period of fierce and silent riding, and then he saw that they were creeping up steadily on either flank.

Desperately he looked about him. Had he a gun, he might have driven them back to arm's length and given a chance for some sort of maneuvering. But now all he could do was to use up the last strength of the mustang in a final burst.

Where should he direct his flight? East of him the ground fell away, and the down slope was one temptation. Going down hill his weight would not tell so much against the laboring horse that carried him. And in the hollow there was a long line of trees. Willows, no doubt, were most of them, but they could give him shelter, and if he could gain that screen they would hunt him cautiously. How could they tell that he had no gun, and even if he had one, that he was determined not to use it?

He flattened himself along the neck of his mount, drove home the spurs, and felt the gallant mustang pour out the strength of his heart in the final effort. Down the hill they raced, drawing away from the clustered men of the posse at every jump. A bullet sung at his ear, followed by the creck of the report. And then the trees were before him with the rush of the hard riders just behind. They passed the screen of the first trees. The others entered with a roar.

He kicked his feet out of both stirrups, halted the horse on braced and sliding hoofs, true cow pony fashion, and then swung himself up onto an overhanging branch. A touch of the rowel as he pulled himself up sent the horse on at a fresh gallop, and, lying on the limb, he saw the others rush past him.

He waited until the last had gone by. Then he dropped to the ground and started back, doubling on his tracks and running as he had never run before. If he could gain the top of the rising ground before they found the riderless horse and came back to look for him, he might be able to get a sufficient distance and disappear in the night, but he was scarcely out of the willows when he heard the yell which announced that his second mount of that night had been found.

On he ran. The ground had appeared firm enough when his mustang was racing down the incline, and the slope slight enough. But now his boots were slipping in sand, and the slope was like a mountainside rolling up against the stars. A short, quick step, driving down on a flat foot, was what he must use.

So he toiled with all his might, grinding his teeth at the constant slipping. He reached the crest. His body would show there against the skyline as if he were a house. So he dropped flat and looked back in time to see the posse come boiling out from the trees.

They scattered here and there, rode toward him, then turned and rode back again. Plainly they did not know what to do, and then he heard the voice of the sheriff as plainly as if the latter had been at his elbow.

"Scatter down the trees. Five of you —you five there!—ride down a mile, then cut through the trees and start working down toward me. Five more ride up a mile and do the same thing. Half a dozen more go through to the opposite side and watch, scattered out. The rest of us will stay here. Take your rifles, boys. If you do any talking, make it short. If you start shooting when you see him, you won't get hanged for it. Now go!"

They were off with yells, and Harry Gloster, lying flat on the sand and gasping in his breath, shuddered with thankfulness. Had he indeed tried to hide in the willows, they would have closed in on him and crushed out his life. Half an hour would have ended him.

He waited to see no more, but crawled a hundred yards on his hands and knees until he was over the ridge and until the voices from the hollow came small and faint to him. Then he arose to his feet and struck away across the sand at a jog trot. He had learned that trick of running from the Indians, who will keep up their dog trot under a furnace of a sun and cover a hundred miles in twenty-four hours, running down horse and man. To be sure, he could not match the Indians, but at least he could run astonishingly well for a man of his bulk.

For a full five miles he did not slacken; then, as the wind freshened to the north and west, coming full in his face, he dropped to a walk, but kept steadily on. He could only pray the wind might raise to a gale and wash sand across his trail, but he crossed firm ground in spots here and there, and those spots, he well knew, would be found, and in every one his flight prints would be like arrows pointing out the direction of his flight to the sheriff.

And the picture of Sim Hargess came before him again, sun withered, wrinkled, and light of limb, as though he had been fashioned on purpose to live in a land of little rain. He was made for the country just as the beasts and birds were made for it. To attempt to escape from him would be like attempting to escape from Nemesis.

A shadow formed against the sky to his right. He dropped to his knees that he might view it more clearly and at a better angle, and it appeared to him that there was a sharpness of outline which could only come from a house. He turned straight toward it, and in a few minutes he was sure.

A little later and he saw the whole cluster of the ranch buildings. It grew in distinctness, and now he put on his best speed. For, as he glanced behind him, he saw that a light was winking on the desert, then other lights, like a swarm of distant fireflies of a giant size. He understood what that meant. They had been using their pocket electric torches to find his trail, and, having found it, they were doubtless tracking him across the desert almost as fast as their horses could gallop.

If the wise old sheriff could do all this by night, how long would Gloster have lasted by the day? He thought of this as he ran, and it gave him a great burst of speed, for he carried his bulk as lightly as any track athlete.

By the time he reached the barns and sheds of the ranch the lights had disappeared behind him. They had made up their minds that he was breaking for the sheds, and, for that matter, he did not need the light to tell him of the rate of their approach, for now in the starlight he could make out the indistinct forms of the horsemen, a great blot of shadow coming rapidly over the sands.

He found the saddles after a brief search in one of the sheds. And with saddle and bridle over his arm he ran out into the corral. The horses milled before him; but he pressed resolutely in, regardless of possible flying heels, for in the distance the beat of hoofs was growing and he could hear a voice calling—that must be the sheriff—"Spread out! Spread out!"

He crowded a horse into a corner and in a moment had the saddle and bridle on it. Then he let down the bars to the corral. They would have their work cut out for them if they tried to catch fresh mounts to follow him, while those mustangs had a thousand acre field to run in. He yelled, and the horses poured through the gap and away into freedom, snorting and tossing their heels in the air.

Other shouts came from the posse as they understood the meaning of the tumult from the corral. He saw a scattered line of horsemen spurring as hard as they could to surround him, and then he gave his pony the reins.

It was all over in two minutes. The fagged mounts of the posse dropped almost instantly behind him; their guns began to pop at random—sure sign that they were beaten on this stage of the hunt, at the least.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HALF QUEEN AND HALF CHILD.

IT did not matter that they were long overdue at home, Peter was sent slowly home that night. For, now and again, Joan was blinded to the way, recalling how Harry Gloster had come thundering out of the jail with the splinters of the broken door showering about him, and how he had beaten the three men to the earth and thrown one of them into the face of the crowd which was attacking.

Whenever she thought of these things she could not help twisting suppositions back and forth in her mind, striving to understand how he could have been so near to mortal danger and yet could have es-

caped without a serious injury. It was almost as if the sheriff and his men had loaded their weapons with blank cartridges. But if they had, Lee Haines would still be living.

Dan Barry, Black Bart, Satan, Joe Cumberland—there was hardly an end to the procession of figures which had been crowded into her mind by the talk with Haines. The tears came when she recalled how calmly and hopelessly he had met his end, and how smoothly he had persuaded her that it was only a trifling wound. Now, when they found him, he would be thrown into a nameless grave.

When she came in sight of the house her fear of Buck Daniels was gone forever. She rode with reckless noise past the house, and Buck himself came running out. She did not heed his challenging shout, but went blithely on to the corral, where she unsaddled Peter and brought him to an ample feed of grain. It was not until she had finished all these things that she went back to the ranch house.

Buck Daniels walked in front of it, up and down, up and down, with a glow of light from his pipe now and again showing the storm in his face. She called to him, received no answer, and went into the kitchen. She was hard at work getting her supper when the door banged heavily, sending a long series of murmurs and squeaks like strange echoes through the house. Buck stood before her with war in his face.

"Well," he said, "what you got to say for yourself?"

She smiled across the stove at him.

"I said 'Hello' when I came in from the corral."

"Hell!" said Buck Daniels, and clamped his teeth together to keep back worse words than this. It was apparent that her smile had done more harm to his peace of mind than her words, although they had been airily independent enough.

"What have you been doing?"

"Finding out the price of Peter."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean five hundred dollars. That's what he's worth."

"You've sold him?"

"Yes."

"Without asking me?"

"I bought him back again."

"Joan, what the devil is in you?"

She shrugged her shoulders and went on with her work. Fried potatoes and a great slice of ham and a mighty cup of coffee and hot milk would not be too much for her.

"You been riding to a fall, Joan, and now doggone me if the time ain't come when you got to hear some talk that ain't going to be like any other talk you ever heard! In the first place what I want—"

"Hush!" whispered Joan.

She raised her hand, and into the silence which she had interposed floated the shrill crying of the wild geese as some thick wedge of them fled up the northern sky. It was a marvelous music to Joan. It chimed and echoed in her very heart of hearts.

She even opened the door, but as she stood there against the outer blackness of the night, looking northward to the sky, Buck caught at her shoulder and drew her back into the room. He closed the door hastily and stood with his shoulders braced against it. His eyes were a little wide, as he faced her, and she thought that there was still a slight tremor of the upper lip as if, the instant before, he had received a great shock.

But she was too filled with great memories this evening to pay much attention to Buck and his ideas of her. The careless smoothness with which she spoke to him was the only tone possible to her. If she had tried to speak soberly, she would have burst into tears and been unable to proceed.

She would have turned back to the stove, but he caught her and stopped her again.

"I've had hell two nights hand running on account of you," he told her, "and I'm damned if I'm going to have it again. Understand?"

She did not answer. She hardly heard the words he had thundered at her.

"Joan! Where have you been?"

"With a man."

"I knew it!" he groaned. "I knew it. Who?"

"A man you know."

"And he hasn't seen the last of me whoever he is!"

"Lee Haines was his name."

It was a strong name, indeed. It seemed to have the strength of a club to strike down Buck Daniels. He fumbled, found a chair, and lowered himself into it without taking his glance from her face.

"What did Lee tell you? Where is he? Where did you meet him? What did he tell you, Joan?"

"He told me about my father."

It was a second blow and it made him drop his face in his hands. She stood over him, trembling with anger.

"You've kept it away from me all these years, and what right had you to do that? I've lived in the center of a lie!"

He made a gesture as though brushing her words away to get at something more important.

"Did he tell you how—how your father died, Joan?"

"All but that," she answered.

"Thank God!"

"But I'll find it out! I'll find out every word that can be known about him!"

"Joan, I won't let you. We start back East to-morrow. I've made arrangements. We're going to go—"

"Not a step!" she cried. "Oh, do you think I'd give him up? I've been cheated of him all this time, but I'm going to make it up!"

He arose and began to pace the room, swinging through it, back and forth, with an uneven step as his thoughts spurred and checked him. But at last he stopped short and faced her.

"I've got to tell you things I been praying all this time that you wouldn't hear. I'll tell it short, because I ain't got the strength to tell all the small things that go into the making of it. When your father died—when Dan Barry died," he began, his words coming forth haltingly, "I went to Kate—your mother. I told her I wanted to help, and she told me that the great thing to be done was to take you out of a country where Dan had lived and get you into a new place where folks had never heard of him.

"She wanted to go East, but I showed her that there wasn't enough money between us to support us in the East in a city. But there was enough to start a small ranch. That was what we done. We came away down here and got this place between us, and the best way to cover up tracks seemed to be for her and you to take my name."

"She didn't marry you after he died, then?"

"When he died, she died," said Daniels. "That is, all except that part of her that was wrapped up in you. And that part kept her alive for a few years. But she was more'n half dead. You remember how quiet she was—wouldn't speak through a whole day, maybe, except to give you your lessons?"

"Yes. And when she walked around the house, I used to feel, sometimes, as though she were afraid of the noise she was making."

"But I remember her as happy as sunshine, full of singing and laughing. Made people smile just to see her pass. All that had died out of her when Dan was gone. You never knew more'n the shadow of your mother, Joan. And when she come to die, she begged me to take you away from the West as soon as I could—"

He paused for a moment, then went on again.

"She begged me to keep the name of your father away from you—"

A great new thought had come to Joan.

"But how could she ask you to do all these things if you—if you were not even my stepfather?"

"Because she knew that I loved her, Joan, more than I loved God or feared the devil. She knew that she could trust me for her sake to do my best for you, and I've done it, Joan, as well as I could, but I guess that I ain't done more than to make you unhappy—"

"Don't!" gasped Joan. "Oh, when I think how patient and how gentle you've been—when I think of that and how you've—"

Tears flooded down her face.

"I've done no more than any man would of done for her," he insisted calmly. "There was never a woman like her before and there'll never be another like her again. You're a pretty girl, Joan. You got a stronger mind and a stronger body than

she had. But she was sort of half queen and half child, and between them two things she worked on the heart of a man till he'd die to give her one happy day."

"And Dan Barry?" she asked. "Did it help you to hate him because you loved my mother so much?"

"Joan, the other day I was telling you about one man in all my life that was a friend to me."

"I'll never forget what you said. It seemed as though I'd never known you untill you told me that!"

"Well, Dan Barry was that man. Does that help you to understand?"

Again she was stricken dumb. She had gone for years feeling that the most prossaic man in the world was this same fellow she had called "dad," but now she discovered enough to make her think of endless possibilities in him. And, indeed, she suspected that he belonged to a former generation which was bolder, stronger, more noble than the people among whom she lived.

He was saying now: "But I've never forgotten that as Kate died she asked me to take you East as soon as I could. I've been saving and scraping ever since. And though I ain't got quite enough together, we can make it do. I can find work of some sort that will pay—all I want is your promise to try to go on doing what your mother wanted you to do."

And Joan, drying her eyes, was about to answer in the affirmative when, through the open kitchen window, the faint calling of the northbound wild geese floated into the room, a chill and dissonant sound. It stopped her voice.

Buck Daniels, with a stifled oath, strode to the window and slammed it down to shut out those wild voices, but the old building was full of rifts and cracks which served now as ears. He himself could hear nothing, but he knew from the quivering lips and the far-seeing eyes of the girl that she still was listening.

"Joan!" he called roughly.

She roused herself with a start.

"Yes?"

"I want your answer. You're going with me, Joan?"

She hesitated.

"There ain't nothing more sacred than the wish of a dying mother, Joan!"

But, instead of answering, her head bent back a little, her glance roved far past him, and he knew that her thoughts were flying north and north lighted by a newly risen moon.

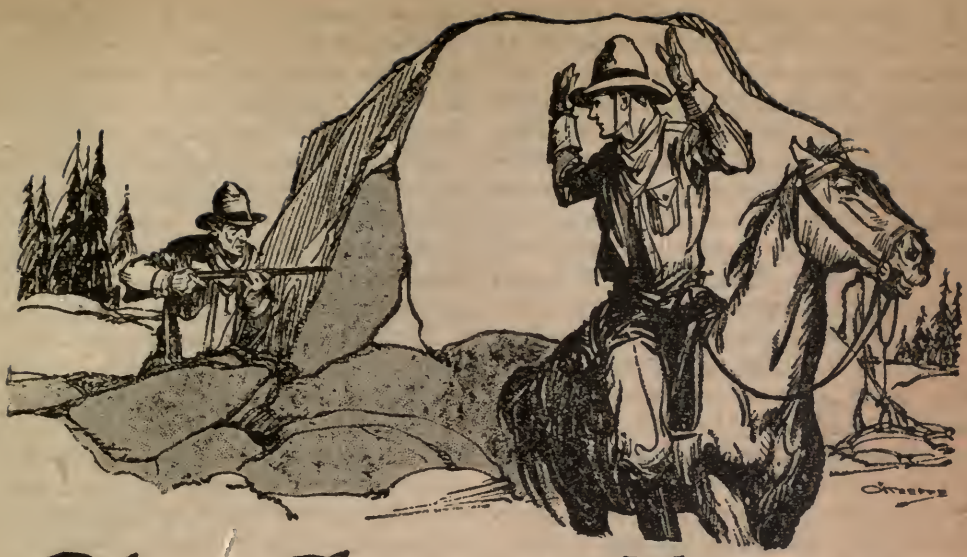
TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

WHEN EAST GOES WEST

HE was a wild, wild
Woolly Western man,
With a steely glint in his eye,
And his chaps hung down
On the pistol side,
And his hat was all awry.

But a wee, wee
Little Eastern girl,
With an awe-struck baby stare,
Came out to see
What the West could be—
And now he combs his hair!

Margaret Severance.



Dan Barry's Daughter

By MAX BRAND

Author of "The Night Horseman," "Black Jack," "The Seventh Man," etc.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE UNCONQUERABLE CAPTAIN.

CHARLIE PURVIS donated his big corral for the show. It contained nearly an acre, surrounded with a lofty and solid fence. On the outside of that fence leaned the men and the women; the youngsters were perched on the top rail; for the entire population had turned out to witness the contest. For the quality of the combatants was known.

Now and again eyes turned to a rear window of the Purvis house. Stretched in agony on his bed, with three ribs smashed in, a great scalp wound furrowing his head, and his left arm fractured in three places, Charlie Purvis could still turn his head and see the battle through his window. It was for that reason that he had donated the corral, as every one knew. He had tried to ride the Captain the day before, and now he wanted to see some other hero conquer where he had failed—or fail and perhaps pay a penalty almost as grim as his own.

The picked riders of the county had gathered for the testing. There were a score who had courage enough to make an attempt to conquer the great black stallion. And there were three famous horsemen who were believed to have an excellent chance of riding the big devil. These were Lefty Gilmore, Sam Ricks, and Champ Hudson, men of genius, every one, when it came to the governing of a pitching horse.

Now entered the great antagonist, dragged along by a half dozen ropes twisted over the saddle horns of tugging cow ponies. He came raging and rearing, already dripping with sweat so that the sun glittered and shimmered and washed in waves of blinding

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light along his sides. He had done a day's work in the passage from the stable behind the hotel to the field of action, and yet it was plain to see that his mettle had simply been aroused by what he had already done.

"He's ready to go!" cried a chorus of the spectators. And there was a little shivering cry of admiration and fear from the women, old and young, for there was enough fiend in the huge animal to thrill them with wonder and with terror at the same time.

It was said that after Lee Haines died, the stallion had been suddenly changed, so that from perfect docility he passed at a step into the most demoniacal temper. It might have been explained that he simply was ill at ease in the hands of a stranger and that he naturally expressed his nervousness with his heels and his teeth.

But no one cared to have a commonplace explanation of an extraordinary thing. It was believed that there was an unearthly connection between the mind of the horse and the mind of the dead master so that the moment the latter passed away the rebellious soul of the stallion arose in a struggle for freedom.

And the horse gained the more significance when the town came to know more about the identity of this Lee Haines. They had found him dead in a little shack among the trees, laid out with his eyes closed, his weary face composed, and his hands folded calmly upon his breast. Some one had been with him when he passed away. Who could it have been? No one could guess. And that was another added element of the mystery.

But that was not all. When they examined his effects, it was found that he carried a wallet, on the inside of which were the half obliterated initials of a farmer who had been one of the victims in a celebrated train robbery three years before, who had resisted being plundered and who had been killed. It started people on a new train of thought.

The authorities sent out a flood of telegrams and very soon they began to learn startling things—that this man was no other than the same Lee Haines who had, seventeen or eighteen years before, ridden in the outlaw gang of Jim Silent; and they gathered additional information to the effect that he was one of a famous band which, for a number of years, had been operating up and down the mountains. It was even believed that he was the leader of the outfit.

What desperate considerations could have led him to take his life in his hands and appear in open daylight in the center of a town was another mystery. His reason must have been good or else the value which he placed upon his life must have been small.

There was still another conclusion. Harry Gloster must have been an ally or even a member of Haines's gang. That was why Haines had thrown himself away in the effort to rescue the younger man. What other explanation could there have been? And was it not known that solemn vows of mutual fidelity held outlaws one to another?

So that, in the days following the death of Haines, his name began to acquire greater and greater significance. And when the posse returned from the long and fruitless pursuit of Gloster, a work which had been taken up by the sheriff of the adjoining county, they found the home town humming with excitement, as if the jail delivery were only a day old.

And some of the significance of Haines himself was passed on to his very horse. They had identified Lee with a long life of successful crime, and here was his horse, a king of beasts as his master had been a king among men. Was it not natural to graft the qualities of the one upon the other?

And when the Captain came plunging into the corral, looking so mighty and so swift and terrible that the strong ropes which held him appeared no more than intangible spider threads, another picture darted into the minds of those who beheld the sight. They saw Lee Haines, outlaw and gunfighter, raging through a battle.

Only to Joan it suggested something else. She had come among the last. She did not actually advance to the fence until the Captain entered the lists and every eye was so fastened upon him that she ran small risk of being closely observed. But then, having found her place behind the bars, she looked through and saw a thing which was

more terrible and wonderful to her than had been even the spectacle of Lee Haines and Harry Gloster breaking out of the crowd and smashing their way through the night to freedom.

She did not think of the Captain as a mere horse when he first entered. Peter was her idea of a horse, gentle, sweet tempered, faithful. She could rule him with a whisper. The least pressure of her knee would swerve him. But, after all, Peter was a born servant. He would obey any other man or woman in the world almost as well as he would obey her. And he could have lived happily enough in the stall of a purchaser.

But here was quite another story. To see the Captain, one wondered how he could have ever been controlled by mere bridle and saddle. For he was a giant. By actual rule he might not have stood more than sixteen hands and two inches. But he seemed a full hand taller; he dwarfed the cow horses to puny insignificance; for his soul was greater than his body.

One could not conceive and remember him in such a background, tied with ropes and surrounded by gaping people in a fenced inclosure; for seeing him, one thought of windy mountains, of far ridges thrown like waves against the sky, or of vast deserts which his matchless speed and endurance turned into a pasture lot. One saw him as a king should be, the wild, free leader of a herd of his own kind.

A dozen men now attacked him, moving behind a screen of their own trained but frightened saddle horses. They pressed close. Then they darted out. He was snared with new ropes. Men clung to his writhing, pitching body like dangling ants.

One went down with a yell of pain, twisted over and over in the dust, and was then dragged away by helping hands. They carried him off the field. His shoulder had been horribly crushed by a tap of those flying forehoofs.

And Joan remembered what Haines had told her of her father and Satan. It seemed to her that she could see Dan Barry seated on the back of that struggling giant of a horse, could watch the Captain quieted and subdued by the strange touches of her father's hand, the stranger touches of his voice.

Ah, for such a power as he had had! To sit like a king on a throne with this indomitable soul at one's command! Not a slave like mild mannered Peter beneath the saddle, but a free companion. There was the great difference. To own the confidence of the Captain meant the taking on of wings, the collapsing of distances.

And an ache of desire entered her heart. Not a passing hurt of longing, but an irresistible passion took hold on her. She looked down to her hands, slender, childish, and the small, round wrists. Truly, she was impotent. It would need Hercules himself to conquer the Captain.

She watched the progress of the work not as a fair contest but as a picture, terrible and beautiful beyond words. There was no hope for the men. She knew that. Vaguely she heard, here and there, voices of men calling out wagers that Lefty or Champ or Sam would stick in the saddle so many minutes; or that one of them would ride the black to a finish. She heard them, but she regarded them not.

They were strong men and dexterous men, but there was not strength or skill enough in all three were they rolled into one man to subdue the stallion. It took forty minutes to snub the nose of the horse to a saddle horn and then to saddle and to bridle him, though experts were doing the work. But eventually Sam Ricks was thrown up into the saddle, the hood was jerked from the eyes of the Captain, and he was gone!

Not uncontrolled by others, however. Three ropes were still fastened to him. He had to tug against those ropes and buck at the same time. And he managed it!

Sam Ricks had appeared a famous man when he first settled onto the leather. But he began to shrink and shrink as the black horse struggled. He became a little child clinging to the straps. His hat had blown off. His long hair was lifted and shaken by the wind. And even across the corral, Joan saw the terror in his face.

It could not last long. The Captain was not a horse. He was ten black panthers compacted in one. And bounding like a

rubber ball, twisting like a flashing snake of light, he shook one of Sam's feet out of a stirrup. In vain the cow-puncher sank his spur in the thick cinch.

Another buck, a yell from Sam, and he was snapped out of his seat as a child squeezes out a watermelon seed between thumb and forefinger. He landed far off in the dirt. And at him went the Captain with a rush, his mouth gaping, his mane flying above his flattened ears.

The yell of horror from the crowd crashed against her ears, but she felt no horror herself. It all was a natural thing. If men will venture into the den of the tiger, they must expect the tiger's teeth and claws.

Then the ropes drew taut, the great horse was stopped, staggered. And, of an instant, he ceased fighting and let men drag away the senseless form of Sam Ricks.

The Captain drew himself up with that blown mane and arching tail, his beautiful head high, his ears pricking, his eyes fixed far off where the play of the heat waves turned the distant mountains into nebulous, half living things.

CHAPTER XX.

SPIRIT OF THE HEIGHTS.

JOAN followed the direction of that stare, and a door opened somewhere in her heart. She understood now what she would not have understood that morning a half hour earlier. All was as clear to her as if the stallion had spoken words.

And by that understanding a bond was established between them. Watching him half in worship, half in sympathy, she found her fear diminishing. He drew her with a great power of which she was half afraid, from time to time, as though there were a black magic in it.

Now they were at him again in a worrying cloud, and he sprang into action, fighting back desperately, magnificently. But that lasted only a moment. He seemed to realize that hopeless odds were against him and became perfectly docile.

She watched him being led back to the waiting horses. She saw his nose snubbed against the pommel of another saddle. She saw the celebrated Lefty Gilmore hobble out to mount, for his legs had been broken so many times that they were twisted out of shape. They seemed like mechanical pieces.

His feet were fixed in the stirrups now. The hood was snatched from the head of the Captain and, instead of the burst of pitching, he remained quiet, looking curiously about him as if he did not even know that there was a man on his back.

It brought a gasp of wonder from the crowd. And beside Joan a man began to sing out: "Good boy, Lefty! You're better than coin in the pocket—"

Here his voice was cut away, and the Captain was seen to leave the ground without visible crouching and preparation. He simply shot away into the air, landed on stiff legs, a shock that swayed Lefty to the side, swaying far out, and before he had recovered his position the stallion was in the air again. When he landed, Lefty kept on traveling. He struck a dozen feet away and, like Sam Ricks, he did not stir to rise.

This time, however, there was apparently no need of ropes to hold back the Captain. He became oblivious of his rider the instant the man was out of the saddle.

And as patiently as before, he allowed himself to be led back and held while Champ Hudson flung himself into the saddle. The other two had been good riders. But Champ Hudson was one of those poetic figures who raise riding to a sort of chivalric height. He was desperate, now.

Joan could see his mouth set in a straight line and could imagine the glare of his eyes as he told them to turn the stallion loose. But she watched what followed with a calm unconcern. They could not tame the Captain.

Even Lee Haines had dreaded the horse to the last, and he was a man of a greater force than any of these. But force was not what could beat the Captain. He must be won, not conquered.

In the meantime this battle gave her a chance to see him in action, and it was a picture worth a year of waiting. It was longer this time. Some of the furious power was gone from the Captain. The long struggle against the ropes and then against the

two previous riders had sapped some of his strength.

For two long minutes Champ Hudson sat the saddle "straight up"; for another minute he remained pulling leather with might and main. And then he was catapulted from his place. The fight was over, and man was defeated for the moment. He would come back to the assault later on.

Joan knew well enough that a brute beast could not win in the end. They might starve him to weakness and then ride him—there were a dozen tricks which they might try. They might in the end even break his spirit. But as she watched him being led away she felt that he would break his heart first in revolt against all tyranny.

How had Lee Haines managed it, she wondered? In the first place he had caught the big fellow when he was only a yearling colt. And doubtless he had consumed an immense amount of time and patience. Even so, his conquest, by his own confession, had been incomplete and he had felt that the great brute would murder him sooner or later.

The crowd streamed on behind to watch the Captain after he had been unsaddled and restored to the little corral behind the hotel stable, where he was kept as county property. There they stayed for half an hour or so.

But the Captain stood like a statue and paid no attention to them. Not even a portion of hay could win a glance from him, but with his head raised high he looked over their heads and at the distant peaks.

Men cannot bear to be snubbed; not even by a dumb beast. And in a half hour the watchers had their fill of it. They broke up suddenly, as if a command had been given, and in another moment they were gone.

Joan alone remained leaning against the big gate post. She was perfectly content. For, watching the stallion, she was seeing the mountains with his eyes, and seeing the mountains, she was guessing at a thousand unborn happinesses which might be found there if one could see and know.

Presently the Captain put down his head to the hay, but with the first wisp gathered into his teeth he jerked up with a snort and bounded back across half the breadth of the small inclosure. He had seen her after having forgotten that there was a human being.

Now he came rapidly toward her for a few steps, paused, came closer, halted again. His eyes were on fire. And whether with anger or fear, all his big body was trembling.

It filled Joan with awe. He had been huge enough in the distance; but as he drew nearer, his great nostrils expanded and quivering, and with his ears pricked and his head high, he seemed to loom like a mountain above her—a mountain of beauty and strength.

She put out her hand. He was instantly across the corral and, turning in a whirl of dust, looked defiance and fear back at her. Yes, it was manifestly fear. All in all, it was a marvelously strange thing that he should have endured the scrutiny of a whole crowd without flinching, and then should have become as skittish as a mustang colt that has never seen a human being, simply because a harmless girl was standing at the gate of his inclosure.

But she remained there with her hand extended, and she spoke to him. He snorted, shook his head with an almost human semblance of denial, and backed still farther away until his rump came against the barn wall and he could retreat no farther. It was as if a fawn should make a lion crawl growling back to his den.

Joan smiled a little, but there was something deeper than smiles could express in her heart, for between the brute mind and the woman mind a current of electric communication was in operation.

Now he deliberately turned his back on her and approached the hay to eat. But it was only a semblance of eating. That prehensile upper lip had not gathered a single wisp when he whirled and confronted her with a snort. One would have thought that he had heard the whistle of the cowpuncher's rope over his back.

She spoke to him again, and once more it was as though she had touched him with fire. This time he plunged around the corral at full speed, bucking and dancing and shaking his head, and snapping an imagi-

nary rider from his back, then whirling like a tiger and tearing the victim to shreds.

When he had demonstrated his powers and when the white dust cloud of his raising had dissipated somewhat, he began to stalk her. There was no other word for it. His long and soundless steps were taken with a sinister care, like those of a great cat which crouches to its belly and works through the grass. More than once he stopped.

As he came closer he flattened his ears, and she saw the upper lip twitching back over white teeth. And for all his size and beauty, he made her think of a wolf. But she could not turn away, even when he was so close that a rush forward would bring him unescapably upon her.

It was a danger which she could not fail to appreciate, seeing what she had seen in the Purvis corral not long before. Yet it was a sweet pleasure to take fire in her hand and watch it burn.

Moreover, greater than her fear was a joy in her knowledge of what passed in the mind of the brute. She knew it as by revelation. She could judge all the cunning which was used to disarm her by a gentle approach. She could guess at the savage hatred of man which was in the stallion; she could guess at it so perfectly that she shook from head to foot with an intense sympathy.

Now, towering close before her, his nose came to her hand. There he paused for a few long seconds, and Joan began to talk. She had no idea of what she said, but she knew that she must keep on saying something, anything, in a certain voice which she had never used before but which came to her by inspiration.

New chords in her throat were touched by those low tones. The quality of the speech affected all her body with a sort of physical pleasure and sense of power.

It was affecting the stallion in the same way, she knew, even before he gave a sign. But at last one ear pricked, and the other wavered forward. He sniffed cautiously at the extended hand—and then she left him. It was very hard to do, but she knew that it was wisest to go away before the great horse should be wearied by the strain of that peculiar war which had been going on between them. She went back to the side of the stable, sat down on a box, and remained there for a whole long hour with her arms locked around her knees, holding a sort of holy pleasure in her heart so that it kept her smiling for reasons which she knew not.

After a time she would go back to him. And presently she noticed an oddly shaped shadow stealing along the ground toward her as the sun sloped west and westward. She looked up, and there stood the Captain watching her around the corner of the barn. She arose and went to him, and although he flinched back, he did not retreat. Not even from her extended hand did he flee, but let it touch his nose—let it stroke him—let it wander higher and higher up his head until the slender brown fingers lay squarely between his eyes.

Not that he was entirely passive. She read a constantly changing story of suspicion, hatred, wonder, shuddering fear and joy in his eyes. He shrank away by fits and starts, and came back gingerly to her touch and to the sound of her voice. For the hand alone was almost powerless, but hand and voice together seemed to be two great magnets whose power he could not resist.

It was the happiest moment of Joan's life. The touch of that silken coat was more to her than the flowing of gold coins through the fingers of a miser.

She looked past him to the pile of hay. It was undisturbed. He had not touched it after she went, as she thought, out of his sight, but following to the corner of the corral he had been watching her from the very first until the sun brought his shadow beside her.

It was wise to let well enough alone. She knew that the stallion would never forget her. She needed no one to tell her that she had already gained far more impression upon him than ever Lee Haines had done. And now it would be wisdom to go; and so, of course, she stayed.

The temptation of the contrast was too great. She had seen him raging like a lion among strong men not so very long before. Now, if she should dare to stand inside his

corral, and if he did not attack her with teeth and hoofs—

If she had waited to think it over, she would never have found the courage. But the first strong impulse made her bend over and slip between the heavy bars of the fence. There she stood at last on the farther side of the corral, to be sure, but with nothing but thin air between her and the man-killer.

But there was no danger. There was not an instant of doubt in her mind the moment she faced him, and presently he came shrinking forward, stopped in the middle of the corral, and raising his head toward those distant mountains, now growing blue with the afternoon shadows, he neighed a soft complaint.

CHAPTER XXI

FREE PINIONS.

SHE did not think of it at the time, for her mind was filled brim full of delight, and there was no place for thought. And, all the time she was in the corral until she watched the Captain begin eating the hay with as little fear of her as if she had not been one of the human species, she was too busy with his beauty and his pride and his grace, and above all else with the sense of overwhelming power which had drawn him to her and drawn her to him with a telepathy as subtle as that which draws together two humans.

If any other ideas came to her at that time, they were of her father. For her father's horse had sired this stallion; and such a horse as the Captain had Satan been, less gigantic of body but fully as great of soul. He would have known how to handle the big black, that father of hers. With his voice alone he had ruled Satan; with his voice alone he could have ruled the Captain. From him came her own authority over the black; and so the stallion was the bond which allied her to the ghost of Dan Barry.

All of this was in her mind, but when the afternoon shadows slanted sharply and the night wind began to move in cool and quiet from the desert, she went back to the place where she had tethered Peter, and mounted him for the return to the ranch.

The glory was gone from poor Peter. Never had he galloped more smoothly or fleetly. Never had his temper been so kind. Never had he borne his fine head so jauntily, canting it a little to the side as if to watch her and his road at the same time. And yet for all that, he had no interest for her, except a sort of sadness which began to ache in her heart, like that lonely sorrow that comes to a man who returns from the city to the village of his youth.

Peter had shrunk away to a tame shadow of a horse. The reality was the raging black plunging hither and thither in the Purvis corral and making foolish and ineffective shams of the men who strove to battle with him.

She was barely home in time to cook supper for Buck Daniels. He was unchanged since she had seen him last that morning. The silence which had descended on him since she had revealed what Lee Haines told her had continued unbroken. He was an older and a sadder man. Once or twice during the meal he tried to make conversation. He told of an old cow of crossed Durham and Hereford blood, a mighty mother of nine children, which had been bogged down at a water hole, and how he had dragged her back to a safe footing, and how she had afterward followed him toward home for more than a mile, following after him as if she wished to express her gratitude. He told her of how a long section of barbed wire on the fence had fallen.

Each time Joan strove to answer him cheerfully and take up the burden of the talk. Yet in spite of herself the silences would come as her mind rambled far off to the scenes of the day. And sometimes she felt a smile starting on her lips as she remembered how she had faced the Captain, and how, at last, he had come to her hand.

She was trembling with eagerness. She was like a child who had received a toy beyond even the highest hopes at Christmas and can sleep only with the treasure in its arms. So Joan felt. She wondered if she could close her eyes that night. And when

she went back the next day, would the Captain remember her?

"Might it be that you've been to town to-day?" Buck asked with some hesitation.

Remembering the fiercely dictatorial Buck Daniels of other days, tears started to her eyes. She jumped up from her place and ran around the table to him.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with her arms around his neck and her cheek beside his cheek. "Is there such a terrible distance as this between us? Don't you see that I love you more than ever? Is there another man in all the world who would have done for the child of his friend what you have done for me? I never forget it. It follows me through the day. And if I don't do just as you want me to—"

"Hush, Joan!" he said, seeming more startled than pleased by the outbreak of affection. "Hush, honey! You don't have to do no explaining to me!"

He patted her hands in a perfunctory fashion, and she returned slowly to her place. Truly she had not dreamed that the gap was as great as this. And when she sat down again and dropped her chin on her hand, even though her eyes were lowered, she knew that he was staring half frightened at her while he stirred his sugar into his coffee.

What had come into her that had made Buck Daniels afraid? She considered it carefully, biting her lower lip.

"Ain't you going to eat?" she heard Buck saying softly at last.

Glancing up, she saw him rolling a cigarette with uncertain fingers, staring at her the while with an intolerable concern. And for a moment she almost wished that she had learned nothing of the truth, but that she could have gone on as before, looking upon honest Buck Daniels as her father. He began to take up the conversation at the point where it had been left off.

"I asked if you'd been to town?" he said.

She nodded.

"It was considerable of a fight they had with that black hoss, the Captain?" he suggested.

"He's a lion of a horse!" she said.

"He's a man-killer," observed Buck. "I hear they ain't even going to try to sell him."

"What in the world will they do with him, then? Give him away?"

"The sheriff don't see it that way," said Buck. "He's going to take no more chances of having gents busted up. He's going to put a chunk of lead into the Captain's head.

It struck Joan dumb. It was impossible for her to talk any more, and the supper was finished in a still more wretched silence. But when she was doing the dishes, a little later, a determination began to grow up in her mind.

The Captain, at all odds, must be saved. She could not beg him from Sim Hargess. She had seen that man, and his thin, hard features were still vivid in her mind. He would treat her request as a foolish child's desire. How could he possibly understand? And yet the Captain must be saved!

When she finished her work she opened the back door and went outside. Buck Daniels was pacing solemnly to and fro in the darkness, with a cloud of fragrance from his pipe following him. The sight of his solitary figure stirred her with pity. Those evenings were ended when she had read to him out of her books and when he had stopped her here and there to ask the meanings of the rarer words. Those cheerful hours were ended, she knew.

And though she wanted to go out to him and take his arm for a while, she was held back by a feeling that he would be ill at ease. She did not wish to hear that new diffidence in his voice and guess at that startled look in his eyes.

As she climbed the stairs to her room she strove to explain it, and what she decided was that he was attaching to her all the awe which he must have once felt for her father. Now that she knew her blood, he was afraid and he could not help but show it.

In her room she threw herself on the bed without undressing and waited a long age until Buck came upstairs. He did not pause at her door this evening to say good night, but with a loud, stamping step went on to his own room. She listened to the creaking of the floor until he was in bed.

Then she was up at once and down the stairs, all silently, not in dread lest Buck should hear her now, but in pity lest he should wake and worry for her until her return.

In the pasture she found and saddled honest Peter, and a few moments later they were bound for the town at a gallop. She cut around behind the houses, according to the plan which she had worked out before, tethered Peter at a little distance, and then, carrying a halter and lead rope, she started through the trees toward the hotel stable and the corral behind it. Voices in the darkness stopped her.

"This is where Haines was hit," one of two men was saying. "This is where they picked up the blood trail. If him and this Harry Gloster had ever got together again with that gang of theirs up in the mountains, they'd of been hard to beat, eh?"

Joan slipped away to the side and passed in a circle around the pair. But she was deeply grateful for the thought which they had given to her. Harry Gloster had been one of the gang of Lee Haines. Of course that was selfevident, for otherwise why should Haines have risked his life and lost it to save Gloster?

That point having been settled, it was clear that Gloster himself must have spurred across country and driven on the camp of the outlaws, that same place, no doubt, toward which the Captain had been looking when he stared far off at the mountains. And if he were given his head, would he not fly to it as an eagle flies?

She hurried on until she reached the corral. There were many voices near it. Two or three men were busy in the stable behind the hotel. And in a back yard adjoining, two youngsters were talking in shrill voices.

The Captain himself, lighted by the stars, seemed more formidable than ever. His black body was half swallowed among the shadows. Only a ghostly high light was struck out here and there, so that all his pride and his beauty were rather to be guessed at than seen.

She called to him in a whisper. There was a snort of fear and anger from the great horse, and some one thundered from the barn:

"Darn you, Jimmy, if you bother that Captain hoss again I'll come out there and wring your confounded little neck!"

There was no answer from "Jimmy." She waited again for a moment and then spoke not in a whisper, but in a low pitched voice. There was an instant effect on the stallion. He had crowded away to the farther corner of the corral. Now he came forward in that stealthy way of his until he was in the middle of the inclosure, paused, then moved straight on to her at the gate.

He had not forgotten! He even stretched out his nose as if to find her hand, and he did not stir when she slipped the halter over his head!

But that was not all. When she opened the gate he came meekly forth at the first twitch of the lead rope, and when she started on he followed obediently. Peter himself was not more docile, except that he always walked behind, and this great fellow strode up beside her and forged a little ahead. And again there was that strange feeling that he was a companion rather than a servant, that he was obeying her mind rather than her signals.

She brought him into the open behind the village, and there she took off the halter. It was the hardest thing she had ever done in her life. How simple it would have been to take him back to the ranch!

But that would have meant the coming of stern Sim Hargess to claim the property of the county, and the coming of Sim Hargess meant a bullet through the head of the black horse. And if she could not have him, better—far better that the mountains should claim him once more.

So she unbuckled the halter and let it drop. She waved it above her head, and the Captain, with a snort of alarm, vanished as if on wings into the night. She stared after him for a while with a heavy heart and then looked up to the northern and western horizon where the mountains blocked away the stars in shadowy pyramids and low running lines. Yonder was his goal, and how soon he would be among them, bathed in freedom!

After that, she went back to Peter. She had been hoping, a little before, that she

might be able to follow the drifting form of the black horse through the night, but a moment of reflection told her how impossible this would be. It would be easier to follow a dead star through the sky. And she must surrender the vague belief that the Captain would lead her back to the mountains and to Harry Gloster himself.

She mounted Peter, therefore, and started sadly away toward the ranch. Three mighty influences had poured into her life one after another. Of these, Lee Haines was dead and Gloster and the Captain were gone forever. What remained to her was the dreadful monotony of the ranch life and the long, sad silences of Buck Daniels.

Peter, swinging on at his smooth canter, started sharply to the side and doubled his pace. Out of a hole straight before them swept a shadow. And, although she could not make it out, the sudden fear of Peter caught hold on Joan. She sent him on at a racing gait, and leaning close to his neck, jockeyed him ahead.

Now hoofbeats sounded behind her and began to thunder past. She looked over in astonishment. It was not possible that any horse could pass Peter so easily.

And then she saw a great black horse sweeping away into the night before her without a rider on his back. It was the Captain!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GYPSY TRAIL.

IF some of her fear left her, her wonder increased many fold. She shot Peter straight on, and the good horse worked at top speed with his ears flagging back, so great was his effort.

Yet, blinking through the wind which that gallop raised, she saw the Captain swing back again into view, coming past on her right; then, a moment later, he walked up on her left—and she understood. He was using that matchless speed of his literally to run circles around Peter.

She drew up the gelding and waited. It was only a pause of a few seconds. Then the Captain came flying out of the night with his mane combed back and his tail drawn straight out by the arrowy speed of his coming.

He shot at poor Peter with gaping mouth and eyes which, it seemed to Joan, were devilishly bright. Peter whirled away, and the great stallion went by, missing them narrowly. Joan dropped to the ground as Peter, mastered by terror, darted away with a flying pair of bridle reins. He was not pursued.

The Captain, after catapulting past, swept around in a short circle, sent after the flying Peter a triumphant neigh, and then brought up before Joan. He had an advantage of ground which added to his lofty stature so that he blocked away the stars, and like stars were his great eyes, half shadowed under a brush of forelock.

Joan, loking up to the giant animal, laughed joyously. It was more beautiful than a dream to her. He had followed her through the night as a dog might have followed, and now he let her take him by the mane and lead him after panicky Peter.

For yonder stood Peter on a swale of sand, neighing his dread which drew him one way and his love of his mistress which urged him in the oposite direction. So she halted the Captain, then ran on to Peter.

When she had the reins of the gelding again, looking back with speechless anxiety, she saw that the Captain had not left the spot where she had stationed him. He was watching her with a high head, and Joan knew now that she could never abandon him.

With fingers trembling with her haste, she tore the saddle from Peter and then his bridle. Then, with a wave of the hand, she sent him on his way. He, at least, would not misunderstand that signal. He would never stop running until he was outside the gate to his corral at home and there he would wait until Buck Daniels came out in the morning.

Dragging the trappings with her, she went back to the Captain. Under his head she dropped them in a pile and let him investigate. He was not at all pleased, it was plain to see.

First he sniffed at the saddle and bridle, rank with the sweat of Peter. He even pawed at them disdainfully, tumbling them

over and over in the sand. Then he went to Joan and, swinging around behind her, he looked down over her shoulder at the gear she had brought.

What would happen when she attempted to put that saddle on his back? She was agreebly surprised. He did not stir when she lifted it high to swing it up to his withers.

And although he swung his head around to watch the proceedings, he did not object when she drew up the cinches. They had to be lengthened, of course, for having been set for the deerlike body of Peter, they could not encompass the ample girth of the Captain.

It was done, at last, and the head strap of the bridle having been lengthened, it was fitted to the head of the stallion. And so, finally, her foot was in the stirrup and she drew herself up to her place.

It was the crucial test. She had heard of many a horse which a child could mount barebacked, but which turned into a fury when a saddle was used. But the Captain made not the slightest trouble about it. He only twisted his head around until he had sniffed at her foot in the stirrup. Then, as she loosed the reins, he straightened away at a flying gallop.

Peter was no common horse, but how different was this from the stride of Peter. Between the beat of the Captain's hoofs, he seemed to float away on wings, a long and rolling gait which made her think of the lift and the swing of waves in the deep ocean. And yet it was all as effortless as the motion of the waves.

She could only tell the speed at which she was traveling by the rate at which the ground shot past beneath her and the fanning of the wind in her face. As for the jerk of laboring muscles, there was none of that.

She made no attempt to guide him. But when they came to a stretch where the footing was firm, she sent him away at full speed with a cry.

Full speed? She had not dreamed what speed could be. As his stride lengthened he appeared to flaten toward the earth. The long roll came out of his gallop. It was like the dart of water down a long, smooth flume of rock. And it increased steadily to such a point that she began to gasp for breath and then drew back on the reins.

Instantly he returned to his former pace, rocking along as before without effort, and with no wheezing or laboring for breath in spite of all his work. But here was enough of play and it was high time for her to go home. She swung him about and headed him for the ranch.

There was an instant change in the manner of the stallion. He fell at once to a jerky, high headed trot, and when she strove to urge him ahead faster, he shook his head in a very human denial and cut down his gait still further. Presently he was walking. She struck him with the flat of her hand on the flank, but at that he came to a halt, and twisting halfway around, he turned his head toward those western mountains which were his goal.

Here was a new feature. To be sure, he was docile as a lamb at times, but that was only when she chose a way which was his way also. She struck him again with the flat of her hand on the silk of his flank. This time he shuddered under the blow and his ears flattened. He was angry now. Another moment, for all she could tell, and he would be pitching as she had seen him pitch in the Purvis corral.

So, with her heart hammering in her throat, she began to consider what she could do. She must leave him where he was if she hoped to get back to the ranch before the morning, and if she did not arrive there, poor Buck Daniels would go half mad with anxiety.

A tinkling dissonance began to fall toward her from the sky. She raised her head and looked up. There was nothing to be seen, but now the crying grew stronger and stronger as some unseen wedge of wild geese flowed north through the upper darkness.

The thought of Buck Daniels grew dim in her mind. Still watching the stars above her, she became aware that the stallion was in motion again, that he was turning, that he was heading north again at a trot and then at a canter and then at the mile devouring gallop. But she had no power to resist.

Every moment her happiness was increasing, and she had a feeling that she had been cut away, at last, from restraints which she hated and that she was being launched on the road which was truly her road because her father had traveled it before her. Where it would lead her she could not guess; and because she could not guess it was a double delight.

Conscience was not a small power in her, but when once one has turned one's back on conscience the chase is long before it overtakes one. So it was with Joan. Although she knew that duty led her back toward Buck Daniels there was something far stronger than duty which carried her toward the mountains.

Hour after hour the desert flowed beneath them. They began to wind among low foothills. At last a dim scent of pines began to blow toward her from the upper reaches of the slopes and, as the dawn began to grow gray, they came to a pleasant spot. Here a stream trickled around the shoulder of a hill, dropped away in a musical cascade, and formed beneath in a deep pool, still black with night, although the upper peaks were beginning to grow out into the day.

Around the little lake there was a small meadow rich with grass, and the meadow was bordered in turn with shrubs and little stunted evergreens. Here she stopped.

The Captain had no objection. When the saddle was removed he went down to the water and drank before she could prevent him. But he took only a few swallows and turned away to the grass. Peter, she knew, if he had been as hot, would have buried his head to the eyes and drunk enough to make himself sick, but the Captain needed no human wisdom to teach him how best to care for himself.

In the meantime she must prepare for her own breakfast, and it was a simple matter. Buck Daniels himself had taught her to carry fishing tackle always with her when she rode out, as well as the meager roll of a blanket wrapped in the slicker behind her saddle.

So she rigged a hook and line on a straight stick which she cut, and sat down on a stone by the pool to try her luck. She had a bite almost at once, and then another.

And in her excitement she quite forgot that she was fishing for food and not for sport until a shadow fell across the water before her, and she looked up to find that the Captain had left his grass and come over to watch the game.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"YOU AIN'T NO KILLER!"

THREE times the pursuers came again upon the trail of Harry Gloster. And then they lost it, but not until the sheriffs of four counties, with their posses, had taken their fling at him, singly and united.

For one thing, it would have been a feather in any man's cap to have taken him. His record included a double killing; the suggestion, which was believed far and wide, that he was a member of the old Haines gang, and a jail break at the expense of so famous a custodian of the law as Sim Hargess. But fame was not all that would be gained by his capture.

His career had caught the public eye. He had been near to destruction so many times that men began to feel that he enjoyed a charmed life. And, all in the space of a comparatively few hours, the reward which was offered for his apprehension dead or alive grew by leaps and by bounds.

Any rancher who numbered his cattle by the thousand could afford to bring his name to attention by adding a few hundreds to the reward. It passed ten thousand dollars. The entire section of desert and mountains went wild with the man hunt fever.

A slug of lead which cost a few cents would make some lucky man the possessor of a small fortune, to say nothing of reputation which might easily lead him into office as sheriff of some unquiet county. Crack shots mounted upon their best horses literally swarmed out by the score. There was no trail too obscure for their notice. They combed the nooks and crannies.

And yet Gloster shook them off. He managed it by a clever move, although he did not at all consider it as a wise measure

when he took it. He had to see Joan again, no matter at what a risk, and so he doubled straight back into the region of his jail break!

He felt that it was like putting his head into the lion's mouth. And every one else seemed to feel that such a march would be the same thing. They hunted with increasing fury, but they hunted in a growing circle, the activity being on the rim while the center of the circle was the town of Sim Hargess and the jail break. That center was quiet, and near it, toward the ranch of Buck Daniels, came the outlaw.

The town itself was humming this morning with a new excitement of which Gloster could know nothing. For, at dawn, it was found that the big black stallion had been turned out of his corral—the gate had been deliberately unbarred, and it was the opinion of all that some member of the Haines gang had come down to claim the great horse.

That so much should have been ventured was considered a double insult—to Sim Hargess and to the prowess of every gun bearing man in the whole town. There were angry little conclaves at the hotel and the general merchandise store. There was gritting of teeth and a looking to weapons.

None of this was known to Gloster himself, for he came shortly after the dawn in sight of the little ranch house, installed his horse near the cottonwoods, and stalked the house itself. He had hardly taken covert in a shed when Buck Daniels appeared, and uttered a shout of surprise at the sight of a trim built gelding standing near the gate of the corral and touching noses with the horses within.

After that the rancher acted like a man possessed with fear. In another moment he had thrown a saddle and bridle on a horse and was riding north and east, leaning far from the saddle and studying a trail. He dipped into a swale, and as soon as he had disappeared Gloster came from his hiding and ran to examine the marks in the sand.

It was at once apparent that Daniels was following the back trail of a horse, and it was not hard to put two and two together. Yonder was the gelding with the saddle mark still showing on his back; and Daniels had left with such haste that he had not even turned the beautiful animal into the corral.

And Gloster remembered the outline of the horse which he had seen Joan riding the night of the jail break. He could not recognize it, of course, having only seen it by starlight, but there was enough similarity to make him feel reasonably sure. Joan's horse had come back to the ranch without saddle or bridle, and now the rancher was following the back trail to find what had become of his girl.

So Gloster returned to the cottonwoods and took up the pursuit. It was not easy work. All day he lay in the rear trying to keep Daniels in sight without being seen himself, and although in the beginning there was some shelter behind which he could ride from point to point, yet it was always difficult to remain unseen.

In two hours of the slow journey, he saw Daniels change his direction to north and west, and start riding with increased vigor. He himself soon came to the spot, although he was not an expert trailsman, yet it was easy enough to read the sign here. Yonder the marks of the gelding's hoofs crossed the sign of a much larger horse, as was shown by the size of the prints and the depths to which they had sunk. Here, too, was a place where the sand was raked, as if the saddle had been brushed across it.

What had happened, Gloster could not dream, unless at this point Joan had caught a fresh horse which might have been wandering loose. Yet what horse could it have been for which she would have given up the fine gelding he had seen at the ranch?

He went on, pondering these things, and finding his trailing problem more and more difficult. Daniels was showing the way. But now they were climbing into the foothills, giving the rancher a chance to look back and down and discover his pursuer. However, the roughness of the country was an aid to Gloster, and by keeping a sharp lookout before him, he felt reasonably secure. The afternoon wore on. The sun was westering rapidly when the blow came.

He had rounded a little pyramid of jumbled rocks as large as a cabin when a dry, unhurried voice said behind him: "This is

my turn to say 'tag,' Gloster. Just shove up your hands, will you?"

And over his shoulder he saw the deep-lined, solemn face of Buck Daniels appearing over a bowlder with a rifle leveled steadily upon him. He hesitated. To be taken prisoner meant death just as surely as it meant death if he trifled with the steady hands which had now drawn a bead upon him. And yet, if he surrendered now, there might be a possibility of taking Daniels unawares later on.

"Well, Daniels," he said, turning his horse with a twist of his knees so that he could face his captor, and pushing his big hands above his head, "it looks like you're about ten thousand dolars richer right now than you were five minutes ago."

The rancher arose to full view and stepped from behind the rocks. His horse followed him out.

He dropped his rifle now into the crook of his arm. Now, thought Gloster, was the time to whip out a gun and try a snapshot. But he was held back by the consideration that it would be poor work to dodge hanging on account of a double killing of which he was innocent, by murdering another man. Besides, the calmness of Daniels bespoke an infinite sureness in himself.

"Ten thousand?" said Daniels. "Man, they ain't put that price on *you*, have they?"

"I saw a handbill that was posted up on a fence post this morning," said Gloster. "Ten thousand it is. It may be raised to fifteen thousand by the time you get to town."

"Ten thousand!" echoed Daniels in more disgust than triumph, so far as Gloster could see. "Ten thousand for a gent that done nothing but murder a couple of harmless old sourdoughs that couldn't get a gun out of leather under five minutes of work. Ten thousand for that? What's the country coming to?"

"It is getting sort of low," Gloster nodded.

"In my day," went on Daniels, "they didn't put that much on the head of a man that would of turned and shot the rifle out of my hands before I could of pulled the trigger on him!"

"Was there ever a man as fast and sure as that?"

"There was, son. There was. Just slip off that hoss, and without letting your hands come down. Thanks!"

The last word was as he drew the revolver from Gloster's holster, patted him for other weapons, and stepped back.

"You can put your hands down. I suppose that the gent that brings you in will be made a hero out of."

"Sure, you'll be famous by night, Daniels."

"Bah!" snorted the other in the most profound disgust. "A yaller livered skunk like you can't make nobody famous; ain't worth nothing but to feed to the buzzards!"

"I kind of wish," said Gloster slowly, "that I'd taken a chance on that gun of yours."

"A murdering hound like you don't take no chances at all," said Daniels. "He wants a sure thing like the killing of two old, stiff handed miners. But the next thing I want to know is why you been trailing me all day?"

"All day?" echoed Gloster.

"Sure. I seen you coming this morning. But I didn't figure that you'd stay after me all through the trail. Now, what's in your head?"

"The same thing, take it by and large, that's in your head."

"What d'ye mean by that? And, mind you, Gloster, I want to hear you talk short and sweet. I'd mind sinking a chunk of lead into you no more'n I'd mind sinking it into a fence post. You ain't a man. You got the heart of a dog wrapped up in a man's skin!"

There was no doubt that he meant what he said. Honest and fierce scorn glared out of his eyes at Gloster.

"What I mean," explained the big man, "is that I'm looking for what you're looking for—Joan."

The rancher started violently. And it appeared that he was about to execute the threat of a moment before, for his hand clutched the stock of his rifle hard and the forefinger curled around the trigger. His jaw set and his face blackened with his emotion.

"I know how she tried to bail you out," he said at last. "I know that you'd been sneaking around seeing her by night. But how come you to be trailing her now instead of running hell-bent north or south to save your rotten hide?"

"Look here," said Gloster, "did it ever pop into your head that maybe I *didn't* kill my two old partners up there at the mine, but that I come home from hunting and found 'em lying there dead, and then cut and run for it because I knew that the blame would be sure to fall on me?"

"What?" growled Daniels. "D'you figure me for a downright fool, Gloster?"

"If I'd been out to kill, would I have wasted time working with my fists to get out of the mess Haines and I tumbled into when we broke out of the jail?"

Buck Daniels started to answer, changed his mind, and finally said:

"Put down your hands. I got to think things over. It ain't nothing that you've said that makes me want time for considering. It's just—what would I do with you if I took you along?"

"Maybe that reward sort of bothers you—wouldn't know what to do with it?" Gloster grinned.

But there was no mirth in the eyes of Daniels. He was staring at Harry Gloster with a sort of wistful wonder.

"Gloster," he said at last, "there ain't nobody in the world that I got so much cause for hating. But somehow when I'm here looking at you, I can't keep on hating. I suppose that you're crooked as a snake—but you *look* straight."

"The only crooked things I've ever done was swiping the horses that I had to have to save my hide once I started running," said his captive. "That was where I was a fool—in running like that!"

"Maybe you were right, though. It would of looked black against you."

"No. If I'd stood my ground everybody would of remembered that I couldn't shoot straight enough with a revolver to scare a jackrabbit twenty yards away."

For a long moment Daniels bit his lip and studied his captive, staring steadily at his feet and then flashing quick glances up to his face. Suddenly he tossed across the revolver which he had taken from the big man.

"There's your gun," he said.

And then he watched, catlike, and saw Gloster deliberately shoving the revolver down into the holster. A man who knows horses will judge another's ability to ride by the very way he swings into the saddle. A man who knows how to handle a revolver for a quick draw can tell one of his peers by the way he handles the weapon even in the most insignificant motions. For a heavy weapon runs lightly over the very finger tips of the expert. Buck Daniels had been an expert in his day. He watched closely the manner in which that gun was restored to the holster. Then he stepped forward with arm outstretched.

"Gloster," he said, "you're straight. You ain't no killer. And I'm mighty sorry for the cussing I give you a while back."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FORCES OF EVIL.

IT had been a stiff climb upward, and Joe Macarthur halted his horse at the mouth of the crevice which cut the mountainside. It was a long raw gash which divided the mountain to its top, some four hundred or five hundred feet above, and apparently water could not have cut the gorge, for the sides were a mass of squared bowlders and great rising steps almost as inaccessible as the face of a cliff.

It appeared that here the rock fold had yawned asunder and had remained in this fashion unchanged since the day of its making. Half a dozen mountain sheep were feeding in the scant pasture at the bottom of the cañon. When Macarthur appeared the wild things apparently showed that there was no interior exit to the gorge, for, instead of running in, they began to mount the cliff face itself with great dexterity. They attacked it with a rush and sprang up its perpendicular front as if the rocks were iron and their feet strong magnets. Neither did their strength give out, but they went up the five hundred foot ascent as though they were being jerked along by great cables strung from above.

Macarthur had reached for his revolver, but before he could fire they were already up so high and pursuing such a dodging course that it was almost impossible to hit a target. So he merely watched the four legged acrobats out of sight and then turned to continue his way.

He found, however, that a man had appeared as if by magic from among the rocks and now, leaning upon a long rifle, was rolling a cigarette. Apparently he was quite unaware of Macarthur's presence.

He was a singular figure. He wore a silk shirt whose hue was a violent blue, with lower sleeves which had been scuffed away to rags. His hands were covered with gauntlet gloves which, however, did not impede the rolling of the cigarette, for the good reason that the tips of the fingers were completely missing.

He did not wear overalls, but a pair of what had once been very good whipcord riding breeches. These, however, had been worn out and rent in many places, and every hole was covered with a patch of overall material sewed on in great stitches with twine for thread.

His boots were those of a man who spends most of his time on horseback. They fitted the foot with shop made care and rose halfway up the calf of his leg. A crimson silk bandanna of immense size and a Mexican sombrero richly ornamented with silver medallions completed his attire.

He was a very fat little man. He did not stand more than two or three inches over five feet and yet his weight could not have been much short of two hundred pounds. That weight was not concentrated in a great paunch, but it was spread over all his body in an equal layer of fat. It bulged over the tops of his boots; it wrinkled on his neck; it stuffed out his shirt so that his upper arm was as large as a man's thigh.

He had pushed his sombrero onto the back of his head, bringing out from shadow a pug nosed, round cheeked, good humored face which was powerfully reminiscent of a prize Poland China pig. To show his nonchalance, or else to call attention to the silver quality of his whistle, he was trilling out a sentimental ballad with all the quavers and sharp runs of a professional musician.

"By God!" cried Macarthur. "It's good old Fatty himself!"

The other removed his hat and bowed so that a wrinkle formed heavily across his waist.

"How are things, Joe?" he asked. "I ain't seen you this long time."

"Who's the leader now that Haines is bumped off?" asked Macarthur.

"I dunno what you mean," said Fatty.

"Come clean, Fatty. Tell me the straight of it. I'm back here to join the gang."

"What gang?"

"All right," said Macarthur. "I can't *make* you talk."

"What made you think that there was any gang up here?"

"I knew that you'd left the old hangout. And once when I was ducking for cover, about five years back, I run onto the hollow inside the mountain, here. Thinking things over, and the queer way that the Haines boys have been melting into the rocks up here, I figured that this must be the new hangout. Am I right?"

"Hangout for what?" asked Fatty innocently.

"I'll ride through the passage and take a look for myself, then."

He urged his mustang forward, but he was stopped by a sharp word from the fat man, who had pitched his rifle across the crook of his arm and laid his finger on the trigger.

"Everything slow and easy, Joe," he said.

"Sure, Fatty. I don't want to do no rushing. But I claim that my place is back with the gang. It was Haines that threw me out, not the rest of you; and I've got a plant laid, Fatty, that 'll give us all enough to retire on. The Wickson Bank, Fatty!"

The little round eyes of Fatty shone as greed took hold upon him. The Wickson Valley rolled before his eyes, beautiful little Wickson Valley, green and filled with growing things from the network of irrigating canals which trenched its flat bottom lands.

The Wickson Bank! Of course, they

had thought of that before, but the thought of a retreat through so thickly populated a region was not encouraging. They might blow the safe to smithereens, but as for a get-away, with hundreds of angry farmers taking rifles and blocking the way to the moutains—that put a very sad face to the affair. However, if Joe Macarthur had really been able to arrange a "plant," that was quite another matter.

"It 'll be the last job you'll ever have to do, Fatty," Macarthur continued coolly. He had touched Fatty at another sensitive point. For as flesh grew upon him, a pound a month, Fatty had realized long since that he must not hope to continue a roving life forever. And he had a favorite dream tucked away into a corner of his heart of buying a small ranch somewhere—somewhere farther north than the noise of his fame had ever spread, say, and there settling down to peace and plenty.

Ah, how his tender flesh ached at the thought of soft feather beds and a wide armed easy chair! His dream was still misty in his eyes as he looked up into the face of Macarthur again.

Come on in, Joe. All you got to do is to make the boys feel pretty sure that you mean what you say, and that you ain't trying to double cross 'em for a reward."

"Double cross? Listen, Fatty, what sort of a life do I figure to fit into except one with a gang of boys like you and the rest?"

And Fatty, looking up, could not but agree.

The gorge narrowed as they went, but now opened into a strange hollow chopped out of the head of the mountain. It was a basin of some seven or eight acres surrounded by five hundred feet cliffs to the east and other walls sloping down until, to the west, the barrier was hardly ten paces high. There were clusters of pines here and there, a little stream running from a spring to a pool against the western cliff without visible outlet, and several acres of rich pasture.

What Macarthur saw last in the hollow was a cabin among the trees, built at random of squared logs and unsquared, of piled rocks and of rocks laid in courses. It was a mysterious hodgepodge such as might have been thrown together by a madman with a giant's strength. For in spite of its singular mixture of building materials, it appeared strong and lasting, and although every wind that stooped into the hollow was sure to send a hundred drafts through a hundred chinks in the crazy walls, yet the strongest of winds could not knock it over like the house of cards it appeared.

The interior was as strange as the exterior. It had been used always as a temporary residence, and yet it had been used very often and sometimes for extended periods so that the upper timbers and wall surfaces of the big room—for one large chamber occupied the majority of the floor space—were blackened with many coatings of soot which had drifted up to them from the fire which smoked in the exact center of the room.

There was no chimney except an irregular hole which had been broken through the roof as if at the last moment those who had built the house remembered that it must have a fire in it, and had made this preparation. There was no stove, no oven. Instead, a circle of fire blackened stones of many sizes surrounded the smoking coals. Some of these stones, heated by the fire, had been touched by a fall of cold water and had split apart; the white belly of one showed like a streak of paint among the sooty rocks.

As for furniture, there was little in the house save the saddles and bridles which hung from pegs along the wall or had been thrown aside carelessly in the corner. There was, however, what seemed to be the bottom of a wrecked buckboard—though it was strange indeed that the most durable buckboard in the world could ever have been driven to this point in the wilderness. This fragment now served as the top to a table, the legs of which were four great rocks, each a burden for two men to lift.

Around this table, on other stones, sat four solemn men. Their faces and characters were so unusual that one might have skimmed all the villainy in the wild West without finding a more dangerous quartet, and justice should be done to each in turn.

Foremost in avoirdupois was Babe

Cooney, a swarthy skinned man so smoothly shaven, always, that in some lights his face seemed to have the texture and luster of youth. He was not more than thirty, perhaps, at the most, but the double battering of years and a hard life had reduced him. The lines around his mouth and eyes would have done credit to his elder by twenty years. And there was a cynical lifelessness in his eyes such as usually does not come until later middle age, at the earliest—not a scorn of the world and the people he found in it, so much as profound weariness with what he had met.

He was a bulky fellow and it could be seen that he had put his strength, at one period in his life, to an effective use. His nose was hammered out of shape and appeared to be spongy, as if there were no bone in it, his grin was made horrible by the absence of several of his front teeth, and his right ear was that mass of fleshy convolutions which has adorned so many of the heroes of the ring and which is called a " cauliflower."

There were other signs, also, that he had been of the profession of the squared circle. His body was a great wedge of which the spreading shoulders were the base and the feet the apex. He tapered sharply to the hips and still more sharply from the hips to the feet, so that the lower part of his legs were comparatively as meager as the legs of a goat. And yet above the waist he was a giant.

However long it had been since he stood on the canvas and scuffed the rosin under the soles of his fighting shoes, he still had a certain dexterity of hand which showed in his gestures. And he had a way of looking people searchingly squarely in the eye which is learned by pugilists; for the good warrior with the gloves looks into the eyes of his foe and sees all the rest by intuition and from the corners of his eyes.

Such was Babe Cooney. If he had been carved in two, each half would have been as large as his left-hand neighbor at the table. This was " Sliver " Martin. The Sliver was so named because the word was most appropriate. All of his body was shrunken skin and bone. When he lowered his eyes, his face was the face of a cadaver. There was purple of cold under his cheek bones. His eyelids were puffy and red, and all the flesh around his mouth was sunken. To make his leanness more ominous, his hands and feet were of huge size. Even the bulky fist of Babe Cooney would have been lost inside the claws of the Sliver.

To the left of Sliver appeared Lew Cambridge. Lew made a strange appearance with an abnormally small head and a large body. The face had one large feature, which was the enormous nose, overshadowing all else, the childish mouth, the dwarfed and slanted forehead. In the expanse of those wide shoulders the head seemed like that of an infant.

The huge body of Lew Cambridge was his chief interest in life. He was a self-conscious athlete. His setting-up exercises were gone through religiously night and morning. He studied the growth of his biceps as another studies the growth of his millions.

He was one of those omnipotent men who can do anything. He could pitch horseshoes, walk on his hands, chin himself with one hand, run, climb, fight, wrestle, throw a knife, do gun tricks—in fact, anything which asked for steady nerves or strong muscles or both he felt to be in his special province. Now and then he arose from the chair and walked about the room, stretching himself to keep deadly cramps and chills out of his muscles.

The fourth and last member of the group was quite different from the other three. Although each of these was remarkable enough, and each was formidable in mind and appearance, one felt that Dud Rainey was most distinctly out of place. He was such a man, in appearance, as one finds about a university, seated in study rooms, delving into postgraduate courses, heaping up degrees for no purpose and constantly gathering materials for constantly unwritten books.

He had a towering and nobly formed forehead, beneath which his bloodshot eyes blinked behind strong glasses. His cheeks were thin and pale to match the deep furrows of thought that creased his forehead. The weight of his head was poorly supported by a scrawny neck and a hollow

chest. When he spoke his voice was low and monotonous and his diction pure.

This was the group which had gathered about the table. They were playing poker. And ragged as were their clothes and poor as was the room in which they sat, their stakes consisted of stacks of gold pieces, fives and tens and broad faced twenties. The ante was five dollars. The bets on the smallest hands were apt to run into a few hundreds. Moreover, they one and all handled the yellow coin as if it were so much dirt.

They were betting now before the draw, Lew Cambridge forcing up the draw on the strength of three jacks, and Babe Cooney still more confident because of a straight, and when the stack of gold in the center of the table had grown high, and when the other two had been forced out of the hand, Cooney suddenly stood up, agape, and pointed through the door. The beautiful straight fluttered from his hand and strewed the floor. The others crowded about him.

"It's Joe Macarthur come back to us—now hell will be popping again!" cried Dud Rainey.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DOVE IN THE HAWK'S EERIE.

WHAT the black, sharp eyes of Macarthur saw first, as he passed through the door of the cabin, was the yellow gleam of the gold which was scattered upon the table. But he did not give it a second glance.

One wild evening at cards had stripped him of the gold he stole from Springer and Nichols and Gloster. His purse was as flat as a punctured balloon, and that gold spoke to him with a welcome voice. However, he centered his attention upon the men immediately before him, and he saw at once that all was not going to pass off smoothly. They shook hands with him, but there was an obvious restraint.

"He's come up with a 'plant' on the Wickson Bank!" Fatty called out cheerfully, entering behind Macarthur. "I guess we're glad to see him, boys?"

"The Wickson Bank!" shouted Lew Cambridge, and smote Cooney heavily upon the shoulder.

But the other three showed no enthusiasm. Indeed, a little silence fell upon the group.

"It's all worked out," said Macarthur. "I got an inside man on the job. He's cheap and safe. And that's what we want. All I need is some men that can be depended on. Of course, I could of picked 'em up anywhere. But I looked back to the old days with the gang. And I figured it was worth while to give you all a split to show you that my heart was in the right place."

The gloom of three of the men had spread to the other two. Fatty and Lew were waiting to see in what direction the wind would blow. It was Dud Rainey who spoke, first arranging his glasses so that he could fix his mild eyes more directly upon Macarthur.

"Joe," he said, "the upshot of this is that you want to be back with us?"

"Of course. What threw me out before was that I had trouble with Haines. Him and me never did get on. You all know that. He always hated me. Hated me from the first minute he laid eyes on me."

"He had reasons," answered Rainey.

Big Macarthur flushed.

"Reasons?" he echoed gloomily.

"What did he say when he told you that you had to leave?"

"Are you going to remember that against me, Dud?"

"Haines was a square man," said Dud. "He had a heart as big as a mountain. I remember what he said in front of all of us. He said that you'd made trouble from the first day you came in with us. He said you were a killer, Macarthur. And he named the men you'd killed. I agreed with Haines then and I agree with him still. I don't think you're the right sort of a man to have in with us, Joe."

The anger of Macarthur turned his face purple. But he bit his lip and then managed to smile at a great cost of effort.

"In the old days Haines and you may have been right," he said. "But things have changed since then. In the old days, if a gent had said to me what you've just

said now, I'd of had my gun out and working. But I'm changed, Dud. Have you heard of any killings being chalked up against my account lately?"

"You were always a smooth, quiet worker," answered Rainey.

But the others seemed to have been much impressed by the speech of Macahthur. Indeed, when Dud had at first denounced the gunfighter, the others had stepped back a little as if to get from the path of bullets which they expected to fly. When they heard Macarthur answering with words instead of his revolver, they were plainly astonished.

"Don't do your thinking too quick, Dud," remarked Lew Cambridge. "Anybody can change, can't he?"

And he wagged his little head wisely upon his immense shoulders.

"But they don't when they developed along certain lines," replied Dud, blinking behind his glasses. "You can make a pet out of a mountain lion. But let him taste a man's blood and no amount of petting will ever make him tame again; the devil is inside him to stay.

"And when a man finds out that there's fun in taking a chance with his own life in order to gamble at the life of another man, he never changes. If he likes excitement, there's no excitement to equal it.

"Why, the rest of you ought to know it! There's not one of us that hasn't had to use his gun now and then. But we use it because we have to, not because it's a game with us. Macarthur is different. If he smells a fight ten miles away, he rides for it."

"Son," said Sliver Martin, "them words sound pretty wise. But I dunno that I understand just what they mean. What's plain to me is that there's a difference here. Some of the boys want Joe back. Some don't. We'll throw a coin to decide. Is that square?"

They agreed that it was eminently just. And Sliver, producing a broad silver dollar from his pocket, spun it in the air as high as the roof. There it hung an instant at the top if its rise, a glittering point of light, then swooped. It did not strike the floor at once, however. With the oily ease of long practice, Macarthur slipped his weapon from its holster and fired. The dollar disappeared, clanged against the farther wall, and dropped heavily. One side of it was torn away.

There was a general uproar, not of anger, but of admiration. Then followed a scramble to get the coin, which Babe Cooney, by dint of tearing the others away, managed to capture as a souvenir.

"By God, Joe!" cried Fatty Guiness, "you have been practicing!"

"Boys," said Macarthur, keeping back a smile of pride with an effort, "this here thing means too much to me. I can't leave it to chance. I ask you again: will you take me in?"

There was no doubt now. The eye of every man had kindled, and still, with a courtesy far more profound than many a circle of clubmen could have shown, they held back and suspended their own opinions until they had heard the final voice of their companion, Rainey.

Perhaps Dud had been swept off his feet, like the others, by this timely exhibition of skill, or perhaps he had noted the change in the faces of his friends. At any rate, he now stepped to Macarthur and offered his hand. It was accepted at once.

"Joe," said Rainey, "you know that I always say what I think. I said it in the first place. I suppose the rest of the boys will think that if you come back into the gang I'd better get out if I care to keep a whole skin. But they're wrong. I've taken the privilege of changing my mind. We need men with an eye and a hand as fast as yours. Besides, you learned when Haines was with us, poor devil, that you couldn't bully the gang, and I don't think that you'll ever try it again. I'm with you, for one!"

After that, there was not a dissentient voice, and when the clamor ended, Rainey spoke again.

"But there's only one way, partners," he said, "that Macarthur can fit in with the scheme of things. He can't play number two. Haines was a cleverer and bigger man than any I've ever met. Joe couldn't even play second to him. If Joe is back with us. I say that he's got to be first. He

gets what Haines got: two shares in every deal we push through. He gets what Haines got: our obedience whenever he gives an order. How does that sound to you?"

It caused an argument, but only a brief one. There was no one who did not have to admit that they stood on a precarious basis so long as every man voted on every course of action. They could not be successful without a head to direct them. And, no matter what faults could be found with Macarthur in other respects, they were all agreed that he had the brains for such a position.

In ten minutes, from being a candidate with dubious probability of being elected, the big fellow was installed as chief, had received the grip of every one of the other five, and had their solemn promise to follow his orders as if he were a general and they privates in an army. The rule of Lee Haines had been as absolute as that of a captain on a ship at sea; it was agreed that Macarthur should have the same powers.

He lost no time in taking up his duties. At the table where the poker game had been interrupted by his arrival, he sat down and planned for them the robbery of the Wickson Bank. With little piles of gold pieces he checked off the positions of the houses along the main street. With a greater pile he indicated the bank itself.

Then he told them what he had done. It was the old story. He had known of the cashier's need for money. He had approached the man diplomatically, and in a single interview he had gained what he wanted—the combination of the safe, the promise that the watchman should be discharged on the day of the robbery, and that a new one should not be hired in his place, and in return for this delivery of his honor, Samuel Carney had received in exchange a promise that he should have fifteen per cent of the profits, and those profits promised to be large. A full hundred thousand dollars in cash should be gained from the safe of the bank.

Such figures made the gang sit up. They glanced at one another with bright eyes and then openly complimented their new commander. He proceeded with the details. There was a stretch of thirty miles between them and the town of Wickson. But the trail was entirely, or almost entirely downhill. They could cover that distance easily in four or four and a half hours.

Therefore they would leave the camp at midnight and arrive in the heart of the little valley in the dark of the early morning, that dead time of the night when men sleep most soundly. After that it would be a simple thing to do their work. There was not even the need of "soup" to blow the safe. They had the combination and could simply "talk to it" and have the door to the safe open.

There was nothing, in fact, which required more than one man for the job except that there might be an accident—a chance passer—and in that case there might be a call for guns that would shoot straight, and several of them, for the farmers of the Wickson Valley were a fighting strain.

It was at the conclusion of this talk that they first heard the singing. It came with echoes through the narrow gorge which opened into the hollow, and it was silver thin and high:

> "Que viva la rumba;
> Que viva, que viva placer;
> Que viva las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
> Y guapas que saben querer."

Lew Cambridge was the first to reach the door.

"By the Great Horn Spoon!" he cried, for he was somewhat old-fashioned in his oaths. "It's a girl riding the Captain, and she's coming into the hollow!"

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CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MIGHT OF INNOCENCE.

THEY poured outdoors, the four giants, the bespectacled student, and pudgy Guiness. Beyond the little stream they saw the black stallion; he was neighing to one of his old companions which was staked out in the pasture.

On the back of the Captain was a girl whose wide-brimmed hat was pushed back from a face that made their hearts jump. She waved gaily to them and sang out: "Is Harry Gloster here?"

There was no answer for a moment. In fact, not one of them could speak until Macarthur muttered: "Let me talk to her! This Gloster is worth somewhere between ten and fifteen thousand to the gent that turns him over to the law. And if she's looking for him, you can lay to it that he's looking for her!"

So saying, he stepped out in front of the others and approached her, sweeping off his hat.

"Harry's away just now," he said. "But he'll be back! Climb down and stay a while."

She slipped from the saddle. She appeared younger and more frail than ever, contrasted with the black horse towering above her. He flattened his ears and snorted with anger as Macarthur drew nearer.

"Look out!" he warned Joan. "That big black devil is getting ready to put his teeth in you—"

But at that she laughed, and to the speechless amazement of them all, she turned and, reaching up, took the Captain by the forelock and pulled down his head. And he, like some fierce Samson beguiled by a Delilah, pricked his ears and made his eyes soft with content.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for June 30.

"You see," she said, advancing toward Macarthur again, "he's really as gentle as a lamb."

Behind her came the Captain and Macarthur hastily gave ground.

"Keep that black demon away from me!" he pleaded. "He nearly took my head off once."

She regarded him with surprise, then stripped the saddle and bridle from him, patted his sleek neck and waved him away to go frolic with the other horses in the pasture. And off he went with mane shaking with his speed and the ground quivering under the impact of his hoofs. He threw three swift circles around the enclosure, to show his happiness in being home again. Then he went about to visit the other horses. Cunning cruel as he might be to the men who strove to ride him, he was perfectly gentle with those of his own herd.

"What did you do to him?" asked Macarthur, still gaping at her.

"I gave him his own way," she said. "That was all there was to it!"

The others had drawn near by this time, and it appeared to Joan that she had never seen or heard of such men except Lee Haines. Haines, who was wise and strong enough to defy Sim Hargess and the whole town and liberate a prisoner from the jail single handed, was dead, but in all of these men saving two she could see qualities just as strong.

There stood four men, shoulder to shoulder, who seemed capable of breaking through a dozen ordinary people. And as for Guiness and Dud Rainey, she changed her mind about their inefficiency as she came nearer and was introduced to them one by one. For Guiness, in spite of his good natured round face, had an eye as straight and cold as the eye of a bird, and about the lips of Dud Rainey there lingered a faint smile which, mild as his features were, gave a hint of quiet, limitless cruelty.

Yes, there was not one of the six who was not strong enough to be worthy of Lee Haines. And perhaps it was their sheer strength which had attracted Harry Gloster to them. They asked her how she had known that Gloster was one of them; if he himself had told her that he would meet her here, but she answered that she had simply deducted his membership in the gang from the fact that Haines had given his life to save him.

It was Fatty Guiness who suggested that she might be hungry. In an instant they were all busy. Some were cutting wood. Some were preparing food. All the old cabin was filled with bustle, half of which was the frantic effort to make the big room seem more presentable when Macarthur should bring the girl there.

In the meantime, fragments of the conversation between the chief and Joan were repeated, and the work of slicing bacon or brewing coffee, or sweeping out with a heavy pine bough, or kicking soiled clothes and tattered garments into an obscure corner, all ceased while the report was listened to which the last man to bring in wood or water had heard as he went past the couple.

"Macarthur is gone," was the first bulletin. "He's sitting there with a fool smile on his face. He looks like a six year old born without no brains. And he can't keep his eyes off'n the girl.

"'How long can you be staying here to wait for Harry?' said Joe. 'Till sometime this afternoon?'

"'Or longer than that,' says she. 'I'm in no hurry. It's so beautiful up here, I could stay a month and be happy.'

"Joe looks as if she'd tapped him between the eyes with a monkey wrench.

"'A month?' he croaks. 'Ain't your folks going to miss you a little bit before that time comes along?'

"'My father and mother are dead,' says she. 'There's only Buck Daniels to miss me. But then, you know, I had to leave him sometime. And why shouldn't it be now?'"

It was Lew Cambridge who repeated this choice bit of talk which he had overheard to and from the pond to carry water, straining, to catch the syllables, ears which had been nicely trained in the greatest of all schools for hearing—burglary! His report was greeted with a murmur of the profoundest interest.

"You heard that, boys?" asked big

Babe Cooney, his warrior face growing pale with emotion. "You heard that talk? She ain't had a mother and father to look after her. She don't know nothing about the dangers of the world. And now, damn my soul if she don't come up here and right in among *us* like a bird flying in out of a storm—but no harm ain't going to come to her! No harm ain't going to come to her!"

He repeated the solemn warning and rolled his terrible eyes around the room from face to face. But he found that all the others were equally busy scowling at one another as if to find some shadow of guilt revealed. All saving Dud Rainey, who was merely blinking behind his glasses, as usual, and rubbing the tips of his fingers carefully over his chin. Four suspicious glances centered sharply upon him. But, with a sigh, he resumed his work of sweeping again, unhurried, dreamy.

It was Sliver Martin who brought the next tidings. He staggered through the door with his face so lenghtened that his cheeks seemed to be flattened together. He let his armful of wood crash upon the floor.

"My God, boys," he groaned, "listen to what I heard! Macarthur was pumpin' her as fast as he could work.

"'You and Gloster been engaged quite a while?' he says.

"'Engaged?' says she. 'Oh, no!'

"'But ain't you come clear up here to see Harry?' says Macarthur.

"'Yes. Why shouldn't I?' says she.

"I tell you, boys, that skunk Gloster has been deceiving her. Besides, what gent with half a heart would keep right on making love to a girl like that when he was outlawed and a price put on his head?"

"A gent that would murder two stiff-armed old sourdoughs would do that same thing," remarked Fatty Guiness. "Why damn a low hound like him! But you heard the chief's plan, and I say it's a mighty good one. We keep the girl here for bait long enough to draw in Gloster. Then tap him on the head unbeknownst to her and go down, one of us that ain't known in the town, and collect the reward. That's good business. The best thing that can happen to that girl is to have Gloster wiped up dry!"

"You think she loves him?" asked the mild voice of Dud Rainey.

"Listen to old four-eyes!" sneered Lew Cambridge, who had a natural antipathy for the quiet voice and the careful diction of the little man. "Look at the old owl that sees everything by night and can't see nothing when the sun is shining on it for him. Why did she come up here if she ain't in love with him? You talk ridiculouser than hell, Dud!"

"You've learned a number of new words, I see," said Dud Rainey, and smiled upon him deliberately, showing every one of his white teeth.

And suddenly Lew Cambridge caught his breath and changed color. It was plainly to be seen that he knew he must resent this affront if he wished to keep his head high in the gang; and yet it was equally plain that he knew he was dealing with dynamite if he crossed the smaller man. But Fatty Guiness averted a crisis by stepping suddenly between the two.

"What d' you-all mean by this fool talk?" he inquired. "Are you going to spoil her party by starting a whole flock of shooting? If you scare her away, you'll have Macarthur himself in here with two guns ready for work."

"I said that anybody could see that she was in love," remarked Lew Cambridge, leaving out his former emphasis.

There was a general murmur of assent, but Rainey answered: "Perhaps she does. I don't know. But for my part, I don't think that she *could* love a man. She has a long-distance look in her eye—"

"What the devil are you driving at now?" asked Babe Cooney.

"Nothing," murmured Dud Rainey, and went on with his work.

Yet he had said enough to make them all watch her like hawks when at length she was called in for her dinner. It was noted that Joe Macarthur did not sit down with her to the table, although as chief of the band he had the right to assume the place of host.

Instead, he wandered out of the house into the open, wearing an expression half strained and half gloomy as if he had been brought in contact with something which

he needed time to think over. But though they saw this to begin with, and they noticed Dud Rainey standing apart and studying the girl's face with his peculiar cold smile, as if he were striving to remember it for a drawing, the four others could see no reason to think Joan other than a very young, very innocent, and strangely charming girl.

She made herself as perfectly at home as if they were all old friends sitting at the table in her own ranch. She chatted away busily, and they watched her slim brown hands and the change and shimmer of light in her hair and the blue of her eyes with a hushed fascination.

She told them how she had won the black stallion, and then how he had brought her through the mountains, picking his own way, while she sat in the saddle and let him go where he would. She told them how he had watched her fish, and how he had stood over her and observed the process of building a fire and cooking with a scrupulous interest as if it were something which he wished to learn for his own sake.

She told all this, moreover, with such enthusiasm, with such graceful and eager little gestures, that they laughed when she laughed and smiled when she smiled. They were so rapt in her words that they quite forgot about serving her and left it to Dud Rainey quietly to refill her tin cup with coffee and place more crisped slices of bacon on her plate.

Certainly there was nothing peculiar about her, except that she was more lovely, more naïve than any girl they had ever dreamed of, far less seen. And then, in the very midst of a sentence, she stopped speaking, straightened a little, and stared far off before her. They glanced hastily around at the doorway. But it was empty.

"What is it?" asked Babe Cooney, his rough voice reduced to a whisper.

"Hush! Don't you hear?" she asked them.

They heard it then for the first time, the faint dissonance of wild geese crying out of the heart of the sky. They heard it and looked back to the girl and now they saw the shadow of a smile beginning on her lips but never growing, a smile which was neither sad nor happy.

But suddenly every man looked thoughtfully down, and into their minds rushed the same picture of a wedge of the wild geese streaming north and north to a land of blue lakes and shadowy virgin forests and mountains from whose heads the snow never melted.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN UNEXPECTED MERCY.

PRESIDENT OSCAR FERN of the Wickson Bank was one of those persons who are envied not for their brains, but for their luck. He controlled the banking business of the rich little irrigation district not because men believed in his business intelligence, but because there was a vast confidence in his good luck. If luck served Oscar Fern well, it must necessarily serve his depositors well, also.

When his career was mentioned, it was always recounted how he "just happened" to have bought one of the largest of the old cattle ranches in the valley just before water was brought in. And again, he "just happened" to have good fortune and hang onto his lands after the first water boom had failed and men were selling out right and left because of the terrible pressure of the water taxes.

Oscar did not sell, not because he saw through the present difficulty into a radiant future, but because he had not the energy to split up his big property and get rid of it in small parcels. So he survived the blue days and became wealthy.

When he established his bank there was no competitor. As a matter of fact, people have a greater respect for luck than they have for intelligence. They respected not Oscar himself but the quality which had fallen from heaven upon him.

And as Samuel Carney, the lean and gray headed, terrierlike man who was cashier of the bank, walked down the street this morning, nearly every man who passed him said: "There goes the brains of the Wickson Bank. Fern is a mighty lucky

fellow to get such a man for mere wages! One of these days Carney will be made a partner, and then watch his dust! He's got the genius!"

Such was the atmosphere of adulation through which Samuel Carney walked. It had lightened his step on many a day back and forth from the grind of the work at the bank. But to-day it did not help him. The morning was very hot, although the spring was not yet old and the hour was early; but here was a little foretaste of the blast of the summer sun, and the sidewalk burned Carney's feet through the thin soles of his shoes.

He hurried on to get out of the heat, and yet as he found that he was coming so rapidly to the bank he slowed his pace again. The bank had suddenly become like a plague house to him. In that building he had built his reputation. In that bank he had established himself as a man of spotless integrity, of sound mind, and scrupulously honest business methods.

It had been the great jewel of his life, this repute for honor and honesty. His neighbors had brought to him their little fine points of behavior. He split the straws for them and showed them the right path. He was surrounded, in the eyes of the good people of the town of Wickson, with all the solemn atmosphere of a judge.

This was the thing which had been enshrined in the bank. Now he was to throw the idol away. He was to deceive his very employer, share in the loot that a band of ruffians secured, and afterward he must continue in his place, wear a solemn face about the crime, and in a year or more, perhaps, gravely accept the place of partner in the firm from which he had stolen.

As he thought of all this he grew cold at heart in spite of the heat of the day, and he went on with his fighting jaw thrust out. And, like a cunning man, he began to prove to himself that he had made a bargain worth while, after all, by estimating for the hundredth time the gains as contrasted with the losses. To begin with, there was the vital need which he had had to meet.

There was the musical training for which Clare had eaten out her heart in yearning, and yet in silence, since her childhood. There was the privilege of sending his wife to New York for the best medical treatment which might, even now, save her. Yes, fifteen thousand dollars would easily do all of these things.

The fifteen thousand, being spent away from the home town, would awaken no suspicions. Moreover, who could ever connect him with such a crime? It could not be! His position in the town of Wickson was a brazen tower of strength. No eye would dream of looking toward him. And, therefore, no eye would see him.

He saw, then, as a result of his connivance at the theft, a solid financial gain which would be an inestimable boon to his family and which would in no wise endanger his position. But could the taking of a hundred thousand dollars from the bank be really looked upon as a barren theft? No, he felt that it was not.

In the long course of his connection with the bank he had surely given them a hundredfold more than the salary which had been paid to him. He could point back, during the last three years alone, to definite places where his advice had been sought for and accepted and out of which the bank had actually gained more in solid cash than the hundred thousand of which he now proposed to deprive it.

Fortified with these thoughts, he advanced more easily toward the bank and opened the door, whistling softly, as was his custom, through his teeth. He almost ran into the president himself as he stepped inside, and he gasped with a touch of horror. The swelling form and the rosy, smiling face of Oscar Fern might have been a nightmare. This was a whole hour earlier than the time at which the president generally appeared.

What could have brought him here this day of all days? A fire of shame and terror penetrated to the heart of the cashier.

"What's wrong, Sammy?" asked Fern. "You look like the devil—all shot, for a fact. No sleep?"

"No sleep," muttered Carney, his eyes on the floor. And although he fought to look up he could not.

"This damned touch of hot weather was

what did it," Fern declared; "kind of bothered me myself!"

And he laughed apologetically, as if there was something ridiculous in the thought that anything could really trouble him in his sleep. Carney glanced up, curiously. No, nothing could bother Oscar Fern. No qualms of conscience, at least, would ever stab his brain in the middle of the night and make him stare into the dark with a weakly fluttering heart and a sense of mortal shame and fear.

He tried to rouse his own anger. This man should have doubled his salary three years ago—and should have doubled it again.

"What you need to do is to take a day off," Fern suggested. "Damned if you don't look hard hit!"

"A day off?" said Carney, seizing easily on grounds which would serve as a basis to work himself into an anger. "A day off? Where the devil would things be?"

The president caught his breath, frowned, and then looked somewhat agape over the head of his cashier.

"Doggoned if you ain't right, Sammy," he murmured. "Matter of fact, you never do take a day off, do you?"

"If a vacation came up and stared me in the face," said Carney, "I wouldn't know what to call it."

"That so? I was talking to Green on the phone. He says it's true. The F. L. and M. is going to build a branch line into the valley."

Carney listened with half his mind. It was well enough to turn the subject, but he brooded savagely on his injuries as he went on into his room. They had brought it on themselves, he vowed. And then he flung himself into his work with a savage energy.

But, in spite of himself, he found himself coming to a pause every now and then, his eye possessed with a hazy vision of his wife, Agnes, meeting him at the door some night with a white face and saying: "I know it all! I know it all! Oh, Sammy dear, we won't talk about it. I don't accuse you. I know it was for Clare's sake and mine—but, oh, God, Sammy, we've thrown away our honor and we can never get it back again! We've thrown away our honor and nothing in the world can ever bring it back!"

Always he came out of this dream to hear his assistant murmuring beside him: "I say, Mr. Carney, if you'll excuse me for interrupting you, I want to bring this little matter to your attention and—"

When noon came he did not eat. Instead he took a walk through the fierce sun. He filled his lungs to the bottom with air. Then he came back and went at his work again.

The heavy footfall of the fat president entered the bank an hour and a half later. Oscar Fern kept Paris hours as far as the noonday meal was concerned. And Carney ground his teeth.

"You fat faced fool!" he snarled to himself. "You have the front. But who does the work? Who has the brains? Who's holding you up? I do it! I do it!"

Here there was a murmur from the little muffled bell in his room. It was a summons from the president, and he went in slowly, gathering up on the way two letters about which he must consult Fern. What jokes those consultations were! For five years he had never been crossed.

He found Fern tilted back in his chair with his thumbs hooked into the armholes of his vest, his rubber heels on the top of the desk, and a fat cigar in his mouth. He was frowning at the ceiling and rolling the cigar from one side of his mouth to the other, champing at it nervously. He paid no attention to Carney as the latter entered.

"Here's another letter from Dundee about the terms," began Carney.

"Damn Dundee!" said Oscar Fern. "I want to talk to you, Sammy."

"Heard a good yarn?" asked the cashier with a secret contempt.

"How much money have you saved?"

It was a bolt from the blue. Persipration stood out on Carney's upper lip. He wiped it away with the tips of his fingers.

"Why—a few thousand—"

"How's Agnes?" blurted out the president.

It made Carney start, almost rise from his chair.

"She's the same."

"You ought to get her out of town."

Silence.

"Carney, you have to get her out of town. I saw her while I was going home for lunch. She smiled at me from your door. She looked like the very devil, Carney. I—her face has been haunting me!"

"And me!" groaned Carney.

"Ah, lad!" murmured Oscar Fern, and laid his fat hand on the shoulder of his cashier. "And never a word from you about her. That's what's been eating your heart out? But no talk; no complaining!

"Sammy, there's going to be a change—a great big change! In the first place, you get a bonus of five thousand in hard cash payable in ten minutes to yourself. In the second place, you get a raise. You could use another fifteen hundred a year.

"My girl tells me that your Clare has always wanted to go away to study music. I dunno why. Seems to me that she plays real pretty on the piano the way it is. But if she's got her heart set on it—why, she ought to go! And go she shall, Sammy.

"And there's another thing—when I seen you this morning looking so damned thin and black around the eyes, it hurt me, Sammy. My God, am I a slave driver? Are my dollars just drops of blood? No, sir! I'd throw the damned money into the river first! I'd give it back to the place it came from. And one of the places is from you.

"Sammy, you pack up to-night and hop a train to-morrow. You're going to take Agnes to New York. You're going to get her cured and you're going to take in the sights for yourself—"

"Wait—" gasped Carney.

"Well?"

"Oscar—Oscar—"

His face had convulsed. A shuddering weakness entered him. He hid his face with his gnarled fingers and the sobs swelled in him. He fought them back, and they choked him.

"Good God! Good God!" whispered Oscar Fern.

He stole tiptoe to the door. He locked it, and as if this were not security enough, he put his thick shoulders against it, and turning, stared at his cashier, sweating. Was this Bulldog Carney? Was this the man of iron?

He went back and put his arms around the thin, labor-stooped shoulders.

"Sammy!" he whispered. "Don't do it, Sammy! It makes me sick! It makes a fool out of me. Don't do it, Sammy!"

Tears began to roll down his fat, rosy, face.

"I ain't through, old friend," he gasped. "I never thought of it before. I never thought about what *you* might be needing. But just ask me what you want. I don't care what. I'll give it. The whole damn bank ain't worth a thing like this—"

A choked, groaning voice from Samuel Carney answered: "I'm a dog, Oscar. I'm a low hound. I'm worse than that. I'm lower than a snake—"

"You?"

"Listen to me. I got to tell you, Oscar. I'll tell you the truth and then get out!"

And tell the truth he did, haltingly, without excuses, the whole horrible tale of how Macarthur had approached him, of how he had been talked into a plot, of how he had given the combination of the safe, of the fifteen thousand dollars he was to get.

He told it all with his face still in his hands, his head bowed low, and after he had ended, for some time, he heard the thick, hurried panting of Oscar Fern. Then that familiar, fat hand reached his and took the screen away from his face.

"Dear old Sammy!" he heard Oscar say.

He looked up, mortally ashamed of his tears, but he was comforted by the gray face and the trembling lips of Oscar. And there was something so childish in the fat man's staring round eyes of horror and grief, that he almost wanted to laugh.

"Man, man!" gasped Oscar Fern. "I dunno how you could of been tempted like that and not fallen. Thank God, you were strong enough to tell me—out of your own free will—"

"Don't say that!" groaned Carney. "You forced it out of me with that great kind heart of yours, and—"

"Hush up! Shut up, damn it! Why, Sammy, I feel like this here thing had made us brothers. That skunk—that snake Macarthur—we'll be ready when he comes—"

"Not that, Oscar. I'd be a murderer if I let him walk into a trap."

"When was this to happen?"

"To-night."

"Then warn him off. Can you send a messenger?"

"Yes."

"Do that. But just in case the messenger doesn't reach him in time, we'll be ready, Sammy! I'll have guns enough ready to blow them to bits!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WILD HEART.

"AT least this is sure," said Buck Daniels, "she's riding one of the finest hosses that ever stepped and she's riding it like it wild woman!"

They had come to a small stream in the evening of the day. The prints of a pair of real hoofs were deep in the bank beneath them, there was a polished streak on a big rock in the middle of the stream as if a shod hoof had slipped, and on the farther bank they could see where the horse had landed again.

"She jumped her hoss across that!" breathed Harry Gloster.

Then, in silence, they hunted for shallow water, crossed the ford, and returned to the trail.

"And you can't guess where she's bound?" asked Daniels. "No idea at all? I know that she's never been up here before. She's just wandering. And what I'm surest of is that she'll never come back."

"We'll find her, though, and bring her," insisted Gloster. "We'll use force if we have to. But we can't let her—"

"Force?" cried Buck Daniels. "Son, don't you know that she's Dan Barry's daughter?"

"Who was Dan Barry? And what does that mean?"

"I'll tell you about Dan later on. But it means that I'd rather handle a raw lightning flash than try to *make* her do anything."

He let Gloster brood over that until in the twilight, they halted and cooked their meal. They had become good friends in a few hours of trailing this day. As for Gloster, he was as open as noonday. He described frankly all his adventures from the moment he returned from his hunting trip and found his two partners at the mine dead, to the time he heard the girl singing near the schoolhouse and how he had talked to her and tried to find her which was like chasing a shadow.

"But since then," he went on, "I've been through a couple of kinds of hell, yet I've never had the thought of her out of my mind."

"Then," said Buck, "I'll tell you about her father; that'll cure you, son."

There by the fire, as they finished their coffee, he told the story of Dan Barry, how he had come out of the south, drifting north and north, how Joe Cumberland had taken him in and had to keep him by force, of how he grew up to love Kate Cumberland; of how, at last, he married her; of how a girl was born to Kate; of how they lived happily in a cabin among the mountains with Dan tamed at last, so it seemed; of how he had taken up the defense of a fugitive from justice and by that had been led onto a long blood trail and into becoming a leader of outlaws.

"Until at last," said Buck Daniels, "Kate saw that there was a wildness in him which would never go out. She could see that Joan had the same spark in her. She had no fear of animals, just like Dan; and she could do all sorts of queer things with them. Finally she made up her mind that for Joan's sake, she had to leave Dan.

"Dan had taken Joan, that wee mite of a girl, up into the mountains with him to the cave he was living in. Kate trailed her baby there. And she found Joan as wild as a little rabbit. She stole Joan away and brought her down to the ranch.

"I and a couple of other men stayed there with her. We knew that Dan would come for Joan sooner or later, and we knew that we had to try to keep him away, and we knew that we didn't have a ghost of a chance to do it, him being a tiger in a fight.

"So finally one night when we were all sitting around the fire and Joan getting sleepy, she raised up her head with a queer look. Then she got up and went over to the window and pulled the curtain aside and looked out into the black of the night.

It sure was a ghostly thing to see a mite of a kid do.

"And pretty soon we heard that whistle of Dan Barry's coming away off in the night and we knew that Joan had heard it first. It gave me the horrors. Kate sent one look at her baby and knew that it was either Joan or Dan that had to be sacrificed.

"She ran out of the house and met Dan coming down the path. She told him to go back, that she still loved him, but that he would ruin all their lives if he didn't go away. I was looking out watching with a gun in my hand and my hand shaking like a leaf.

"I seen Dan standing in the path with his hat pushed back from his face smiling at her. He started walking toward her. She warned him. He kept on. And then she fired.

"His wolf-dog stood over his body and snarled at us until Dan was dead, and then the dog and the black hoss went tearing off through the night. I picked Dan up in my arms. He'd been a lion of a man when he was alive. But being dead, he wasn't hardly no more'n a boy in his weight.

"But that was the end of Dan Barry, Gloster. And what I've been waiting for all these years has been in fear that the same wildness would come out in Joan. And it came! It started the night she talked to you at the dance.

"And now she's cut loose from me and gone off by herself, she'll never come back and nothing can make her. It's a wild goose chase we're following, Gloster!"

The big man had listened like a child, and now he sighed and looked down to his hands, as though he found a subtle comfort in the contemplation of the strength which was in them.

"I'll find a way," he said at last.

Buck Daniels shook his head.

"Because," said Gloster, "no matter what a man may be, a girl is different. The woman in her makes her different."

They did not speak again, but by mutual consent they packed again, put the saddles once more on the weary horses, and pushed on. So it was that they came, when the last of the sunset light had faded out, to a rough cleft in the face of the mountain which lifted its head a full five hundred feet above them.

It was too dark to follow the trail farther, and Buck Daniels suggested that they camp for the night where they were. Accordingly, there they put down their blankets, and in five minutes Buck Daniels was snoring noisily.

But the thoughts of Harry Gloster gave him no rest. The bright shining of the stars became entangled with the wild tale that Daniels had told him. The full horror of it had only gradually sunk in upon his brain, but now he could not tell which was more blood-curdling—the slaying of Dan Barry by Joan's mother, or those first stirrings of mysterious wild instincts in Joan herself.

He saw, at length, that there was no sleep for him on this night. So he pulled on his boots and stepped away for a walk and a quiet pipe by himself. He turned down the narrow defile. At the place where the rock walls came together, he could find the perfect seclusion which he wanted.

But the rock walls did not join. Instead, the narrow defile twisted to one side and presently he found himself in a large hollow carved mysteriously out of the mountain, a sort of natural fort with solid cliffs for walls. There were trees scattered here and there. He saw horses grazing, and, above all, his eye caught a gleam of light.

It was a startling thing to know that there was a human residence here in the heart of the mountains, but he now made out the big outlines of the house and he approached at once, not boldly, but with a sufficient stealth, for there might be reasons enough why the man who dwelt there chose to live in solitude. There were the horses, too, which must not sight or scent him unless he chose to be betrayed by their neighing.

The door of the house was open. All was silent within, and the smoky lantern, having been turned down low, threw the feeblest of lights. He stole past the door and, glancing within, he made out two or three bunks against the farther wall, with a man in each. He could see enough of the rest of the room to make out that it was

furnished in the most primitive and makeshift fashion.

He had seen enough, moreover, to make him understand that it would be very wise if he did not venture in among these men or wake them with questions. Men did not sleep with rifles leaning beside them if they were of a pacific character.

He retreated a little into the deeper darkness to think over his position. Some of these fellows might well have seen Joan if she had come this way. But it took time before he could make up his mind to risk inquiry.

Then, at a little distance from the larger building he saw a second which was a small shed, and, starting to investigate this also, he found that the door of the shed was likewise open. No sooner had he approached it than he inhaled a fragrance of evergreens.

He leaned in. A bed of evergreens, in fact, had been piled on the floor, and the pine boughs had been leaned against the corners of the little room as if by way of decoration. By the time his eyes were a little more accustomed to the murkiness, he saw that the blankets on the bed were tenantless.

Whoever had been sleeping there had risen and gone out, it appeared. In that case, he was in the most imminent danger of being discovered when the other man returned. And in the case of such a discovery he had no doubt that the challenge he would receive would be an unheralded bullet without a word of warning.

He was wrong. For at the very moment of his withdrawal, before he had time to turn, he heard a voice murmur behind him: "Who's there? Put your hands up and don't turn around! Who's there?"

The words were formidable enough, but it was the voice which had a meaning for Gloster.

"Joan!" he gasped. "Joan!"

He whirled upon her. She slipped away beyond his arms. He blundered a pace after her and then saw that it was useless to pursue a phantom.

"It's Harry Gloster, Joan!" he pleaded. "Don't you understand?"

She was silent, leaning her back against the trunk of a small sapling that deepened the shadow of the night upon her. Yet, Gloster could feel her eyes watching him.

"Joan!" he repeated in a wild alarm, as she neither stirred nor spoke. "What's happened? What's wrong?"

He strode into the shadow of the tree, but her voice stopped him short.

"Don't come closer. Stay there, Harry. I—it chokes me to have you closer!"

And, with a sickening of the heart, he knew that he had lost her indeed.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE UNTAMABLE SOUL.

HE stepped back out of the deeper dark under the tree as though there had been a poison in its influence, and, when he had waited for her to speak, he said at last: "Will you come out here where I can see you, Joan? The starlight is dim enough, but it may help me to understand what's wrong."

She waited another moment, and then she came slowly toward him. When she paused, he could see her face, half by guess. And yet he could not understand.

"I know," he said at last. "You've finally believed the lies they tell about me. You believe that I killed Nichols and Springer. Is that it, Joan?"

She shook her head.

"It isn't that, Harry."

"Then what have I done?"

"Nothing. You see, all that's wrong is wrong in me."

Her voice was half sad, half wondering. "Don't ask me any more," she added.

"Tell me only why you're here?"

"I came up here hunting for you."

"Joan!"

He would have gone to her, but she stopped him with a small gesture.

"But I know now that I was really hunting for something else. After Lee Haines set you free, every one knew that you belonged to his gang. And I thought that his horse might guide me up to the rendezvous, where I'd find you. He brought me here—"

"Is that the gang of Lee Haines in the big house?"

"Yes."

"God in heaven! You're in their hands?"

"There's no harm in them for me. From Joe Macarthur to—"

"Who?"

"Joe Macarthur."

"He's there?"

"He's the new leader. Don't you know that?"

"I've never been one of them. Did they tell you that I was?"

"Yes."

"It was a trap, Joan. Macarthur hates me. I never followed Haines. I never knew him until the day before he freed me from the jail. But we'll talk of it afterward. Now we must go at once—quickly, Joan, before one of those sleeping tigers in there hears us!"

She shook her head.

"I can't go, Harry."

He said the words over to himself. Then a possible explanation came into his mind.

"You've found a man here that you care for!"

"Not one, but all of them—"

"Are murderers!"

"They're free men," said Joan.

"What lies have they been telling you about themselves?"

"It's in their faces, Harry. It's in nothing they say."

"Joan, some strange idea has come to you. Come away with me. We'll talk of it when you're back in your father's house. And I'll teach you to care for me again. Believe me, Joan, by all that's holy!"

"I care more for you now, Harry, than I ever did."

"Do you mean that?"

"Ah, a thousand times! But don't come near me! Don't come a step nearer!"

"Joan, you drive me mad! Why must I stay away?"

"Because, if you touched me, something would break in me. I'd laugh—I'd cry—I don't know what. But my heart would nearly break, Harry. I know that!"

He could not help but come close. She made no effort to escape him and so, suddenly, she was in his arms. But when he leaned to her he found he could not touch her lips. It was as if an arm stronger than his held him back.

"Let me go, Harry! Let me go," she was whispering.

"Not if God can help me to keep you!"

"God would not bring that unhappiness into your life."

"Joan, have you gone mad?"

"I've seen the truth about myself."

"Let me tell you that truth. Here I can see only a shadow of all that you are. But even that shadow is beautiful as a bright morning. No king in the world is as great a man as I if I can hear you say that you love me."

"I do love you, dear."

"Then come with me."

"It would ruin your life. You don't know me, Harry. My heart is aching to let you take me away with you, and to give up thinking, and to put all the burden of my life on your shoulders—"

"They're strong enough to hold it. Listen to me, Joan, I've never fought for things worth having. I've played along through my life. But now I'm ready to work, and what I'll do for you—Joan, I'd tear the hills up by the roots for your sake!"

"We would have one month of happiness, Harry, and then all the rest would be sorrow!"

"Give me your trust, and I'll build happiness for both of us and base it on solid rock!"

"It's that which I dread. What would you do, Harry?"

"Make you a home for our family."

"That's what I dread. I want to be free to ride north in the winter and south in the summer. I don't want to be rooted in one place like a tree."

"Then we'll live in a camp wagon—or we'll live in the saddle."

She freed herself from his hands. And he felt that it was a hopeless battle after that instant.

"Will you let me try to tell you everything?"

"For God's sake, do."

"When I went on the trail with the Captain, I thought that I was trying to find you. But I was wrong. What I really was hunting for was what I guessed at when I

first saw you—strength, strong enough to be free and to stand by yourself. And I felt that there was something behind you—that wild freedom into which you could take me with you. But you came to-night claiming me, reaching for me—"

"My head's spinning like a top, Joan. I'm fighting hard to understand, but I never said that I wanted to own you."

"You don't call it that. But you want to marry me."

"God willing. And then work for you with all the strength of my soul and my hands."

"Ah, there it is! Every bit of work you did for me would be another anchor weight around my feet keeping me with you. I'd owe you gratitude and pity for your pain and trouble."

"I'd have servants for you, Joan. There'd be no drudgery for you."

"Do you dream that I dread just physical work? No, no! Not that, but the freedom, Harry. Every spring and every fall when the wind blows in a certain way and the wild geese are crying, there would come a time when I would wish to go."

"Then you could go, Joan, and come back again."

"Leave you—and you not knowing where I had gone? Harry, I could do it—but, oh, it would kill you! I know it would. I was never meant to give a man happiness. I was meant only to find the one man I could love—one whom I loved more than myself—one whom I loved enough to give up my dreams."

"For what, Joan?"

"Ah, if I understood why, I could conquer it. But all I know is that sometimes when the geese are flying it seems to me that I shall die unless I can follow them to some glorious place—and now that I've started to follow them, Harry, I'll never turn back!" Her tone was dreamily inexorable.

Had he been a smaller man he would have stormed at her. But as it was he waited for a while, realizing the inevitable, determined to battle against it still, but bowing to it for the time being.

He said soberly, after a moment: "Good-by, Joan, for a little while."

"For both our sakes, Harry, it's good-by forever."

Instead of answering he stepped closer to her and, taking her face between both his big hands, he tilted back her head and kissed her lips. They were as cold as her cheeks, and her eyes, he thought, looked up to him as if he were as far removed as the stars above them.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE FOURTH WHITE PEBBLE.

HE went back to the entrance to the hollow and, looking around, he saw Joan still watching him. So he went on to Buck Daniels sleeping at the mouth of the gap. He shook Buck into wakefulness, and when he was sitting up in his blanket, told him briefly and clearly everything that had happened. When he had finished he waited for a reply.

But, first of all, Buck found his pipe, filled it very slowly, and lighted it. He puffed away at it for a time.

"I knew when I hit the trail," he said at length, "that it ain't no good. It was the same way with the trails that I took after Dan Barry. Once I tried to bring him back to Kate. And the way I worked it was by insulting Dan. I hit him across the face in front of a lot of other gents.

"Then I turned and ran for it. He came fast, but I had a relay of hosses fixed up, and they got me back to the ranch in the nick of time. And handling Joan is like handling the ghost of Dan. There ain't nothing we can do for her. Our work is ended, Harry."

"We leave her here with this gang of cutthroats?"

"She's safe enough with them. There ain't a man born that wouldn't go barefooted to Jerusalem for her if she asked him to."

"You're going back to the ranch?"

"I dunno. It sort of takes the interest out of life for me. I was fighting all these years to keep away what's happened. Now it's here. She seen the wild geese flying. She's listened to them and she's heard things that you and me and nobody else

could ever understand. Let her go her own way, Harry. You'd just be spoiling her life to follow."

Harry shook his head.

"I can't give her up," he said. "And the farther she is away from me, the more I want her. Buck, I've got a plan that may sound crazy, but it's one I'm going to stick to."

"Lemme hear it."

"I'm going to join Macarthur's gang."

"You'll join a slug of lead out of Macarthur's gun, you mean."

"I don't think that he can turn me down. The rest of his men will want me, simply because I'm outlawed. They'll think I'm more valuable than I am. And they'll vote Macarthur down and take me in.

"That way I'll be close to Joan while she's with them. And when she leaves, I leave! And suppose that you, Buck, hung around in the offing and waited for a chance. I don't know what might come up, but there's always a chance, you know. Two men can do a lot. You and I might be able to get Joan away. Does it sound good to you?"

"To me," murmured Buck, "it sounds like fool talk."

He added: "But I was always nine-tenths fool myself. If you want to take the big chance, I'll take the little one. But nothing will come out of this but a considerable bunch of hell fire for all of us. You mark my words, Harry!"

But the big man could not be moved. He saddled his horse, while Buck did the same and started off down the mountainside to find covert. Gloster himself, mounting, rode straight back through the defile and into the hollow. Joan had disappeared from the door of her hut. No doubt, by this time, she had shrugged away the thought of him and banished whatever regrets might have lingered in that strange, cold heart of hers.

Indeed, as he thought of it and grinding his teeth, he swore that he would not go another step on this wild trail. But still he went on. For the more distant she became the more all the man in him rose up in a fierce determination to fight the great fight until he had won her. And as he remembered her slender grace and thought of his own huge power which nothing in his life had ever fully taxed, it seemed impossible that he should fail.

Straight to the door of the hut he went, dismounted, and striding into the room, stamped heavily upon the floor. Six figures started up. But only five guns glistened. For Gloster had stepped to Macarthur in the farther corner and, as the chief started up, his wrists were caught and his arms were twisted up behind his back.

He was only momentarily at a disadvantage, of course, for the guns of his followers were trained on his assailant. But in the meantime, this was a shameful thing, to be mastered by the hands of any single man. He writhed with all his power. The answer was merely an increased power.

"Be quiet, Macarthur," said Harry Gloster. "Be quiet, or I'll break your arms for you. Boys, hold off with your guns till I have a talk with you. Macarthur here has a grudge against me. But I've come up here to join you if you'll take me. My name's Harry Gloster. And the country's too hot for me. What do you say? Do I get a hearing?"

"Take him off!" groaned Macarthur. "Blow his head off, Babe. The skunk took me by surprise—"

"Wait a minute," said Babe, stretching the sleep out of his arms and deliberately dropping his gun back into his holster. "If there's only one, I guess that there ain't any need of making a hurry call on the lead. What are you aiming at, Gloster?"

"At a chance to talk without having Macarthur blow my head off."

Here he shifted both of Macarthur's arms, held them with the mighty grip of his one hand, and then snatched the weapons from the holsters of the leader, for Macarthur wore two guns.

"That's a lot better," he declared, and rising, he stepped away from his victim.

Macarthur leaped to his feet with a yell of rage and whirled at Gloster. But his own weapons covered him, and the rest of the gang stood by, if not indifferent, at least more than a little amused. They respected the fighting qualities of Joe Macarthur. Yet they were not at all unwilling to see him somewhat humbled.

"Damn you all!" shouted Macarthur. "What d'ye mean by it? Dud, lend me a gun and I'll—"

"There ain't anybody else in sight," declared Sliver Martin, coming back from the door. "We got this game in our hand. Might as well let him take a trick or two to begin with. What you after, Gloster? A place with us, d'ye mean?"

"What else is there left for me?" asked Gloster with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "I'd hunt up a crew where the leader didn't hate my heart, but I want to work with *men*, and that's what Haines's old crowd is made up of by all reports. What I say is: give me a chance, fellows. You'll find I'll go as far as any of you!"

"If that's the run of it," said Macarthur, "we'll talk first—and you and me 'll have our little party afterward, Gloster. You say you came up here to join?"

"No, I came up here on the trail of a girl."

His frankness staggered the leader.

"Talk straight, Gloster. You came for the girl and you didn't find her—now you want to join us?"

"I found her. And I found that I wasn't wanted." He managed to smile. "I found that out and I found out who you fellows were. It's an ill wind that blows nobody good, old son. Will you give me a try?"

Macarthur spoke slowly.

"This gent comes up here," he said, "talks to Joan, finds she don't want nothing to do with him, and then comes begging us to take him in. What he wants ain't action, but just a chance to be near her. Ain't that reasonable? Besides, what I say is that we don't want to have in the gang any skunk that would murder two harmless old sourdoughs. Am I right?"

"Right!" blurted out Babe Cooney.

"Right!" chimed in the others, with the exception of Dud Rainey. The latter, as usual when he was most thoughtful, was rubbing his finger tips lightly over his chin.

"If he killed the two old boys," he said quietly, "we certainly don't want him."

"*If* he killed them?" roared Macarthur. "If he didn't, who the hell did? Ain't they got a price laid on his head? Did he stand his trial or did he cut and run for it?"

"Does he look like murder to you?" asked Dud, as quietly as ever.

It was only a small argument, but it came at exactly the right time and, in contrast with the heap of damning statements from Macarthur, this suggestion had a peculiar weight. All eyes swept to Harry Gloster, and the sight of his frank and open face told heavily in his favor.

"Besides," went on Dud, "what have *you* got against him, Joe?"

It was another facer for Joe. He considered Dud with actual hatred for a moment and then, thrusting out his jaw, he turned on Gloster.

"You tell it," he said.

"We had a little argument," said Gloster. "That was all. But Macarthur took it to heart."

The leader lost some of his purple color of rage. He had not expected that Gloster would fail to take advantage of this chance to tell how he had floored the gunfighter.

"We'll vote on this thing," he said. "Don't have to do it out loud. Pick up some pebbles, boys. White ones let him in and black ones turn him out. There's my hat to drop them in."

Pebbles were immediately at hand, for most of the floor of the building was gravel. The site had been selected for the cabin because it was near wood and water, and the frame had been built even around two or three large stones which cropped out nearer the western end of the apartment.

The voting idea was eagerly taken up by the gang. They hurried to pick up their particular choice, And going to the hat they dropped in their votes. Macarthur raised his sombero and poured out the contents into the palm of his hand.

"Three of us have voted him in," he remarked," and there's three that want him to stay out. I'm one of them, and since by rights I ought to have two votes anyway, and vote again and that vote is to—"

"Wait a minute," broke in Gloster as he saw the tide turning against him. "I've got something to add."

He went to the end of the room and leaned over a projecting rib of limestone which the soot from the fire had only succeeded in turning a dark gray. Over this

he bent, laid hold upon it with his hands, and began to lift.

But the rock was lodged deep in the earth, and that earth had been tramped solid as stone itself. Yet he increased his effort instead of giving up his purpose, whatever that might be. The members of the gang gathered to watch, half in wonder and half in appreciation.

For they needed no scales to tell them that Gloster was attempting to budge a great weight. Even the mass of stone which projected above the ground appeared more than any one man could stir and there was an unknown portion of the whole mass hidden from sight, besides which, it was fixed in its place.

"Don't try to pull the mountain up by the roots," cautioned Dud Rainey, but the chuckle which followed this sally was very short.

They were far too much interested in the effort of Gloster. Their faces worked with the pain of sympathy and their hands closed. He had sunk to a half-crouching position, now. His back bowed with the immense pressure. His arms quivered under the strain as ropes tremble when horses pull against them, yet still that pressure was being increased.

It was as thought there was a fountain of power in his body and this was being drained to the last drop. Now his shoulders began to rise. His head bowed between them and his swelled neck was purple with congested blood.

There was a slight noise.

"It's started!" gasped Babe Rooney who, strong man as he was, was gazing now as a child stares when it hears a fable.

But it had not been budged. The noise had come from the ripping of Gloster's coat over one shoulder. The swelling, iron-hard muscles had parted the stout cloth as if it were tissue paper.

He sank a bit lower. The ground was not particularly moist, but his feet were sinking into it. The seam of his trousers over the bulging thigh parted. Now his whole body jerked up a fraction of an inch —the stone had budged!

"By God!" whispered some one. "He's winning!"

There was not a man who had not crouched in sympathy, saving only Dud Rainey, who was still rubbing his finger-tips across his chin.

"Now!" they muttered in a faint chorus.

For suddenly the stone had risen six inches. They were beginning to guess at the full hugeness of its mass. But it caught again and then with a great wrench, Gloster tore it out. The entire lower section of it was gleaming white, a deep and ragged hole hole was left in the floor, and walking as though he were carrying a mere armfull of wood, Gloster crossed the room and cast down the mass at the feet of Macarthur.

The very ground quaked under the impact. Gloster stepped back, his purple face distorted with the effort.

"You were wrong, Joe," he said. "There are four white pebbles instead of three! And I stay in the crowd, eh?"

Whatever hatred Macarthur might have felt for the new applicant, he was swept away for the moment by his enthusiasm for Gloster's physical power. He clapped him heartily on the shoulder.

"Harry," he said, "you're one of us, and as good a one as any!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

BLOOD BROTHERS.

SO Harry Gloster became a sworn member of the band. It was a curious ceremony, the taking of that oath. Macarthur called upon Dud Rainey to administer it for the very good reason that slang cannot be a solemn medium, and there was no one but Dud capable of speaking pure English.

But if the others had not the language for their parts, they at least made an effective background. They took off their sombreros and put on grave frowns as they stood about in a semicircle facing Gloster, each man with his eyes riveted upon the face of the new member. Upon his good faith all their lives might depend, for all they knew, before that very night was ended.

They, who would have thought nothing

of perjury in a court of law, would sooner have cut off their right hands than break the word pledged to their fellows in crime. For if faith in such cases began to be broken, there was no holding together, and if they could not hold together, they would be hunted down like dogs by the servants of the law.

They were putting their lives into the hands of this new man. No wonder, then, that as they faced him, they searched him to the very soul.

"Gloster," said Dud Rainey, "there's no Bible in this oath. There's not a word about God. We put a man upon his own honor, because we know that no matter what any of us may have done, every man here has that honor. Keep that in mind. And then listen to me and repeat after me."

He began speaking, making a pause here and there so that Gloster might repeat what he had said.

"I, Harry Gloster, give my honor and pledge my word that I shall truly and faithfully live with all the men who are now with me. If I have any old quarrel or grievance against any of them, I shall bury it and never bring it to the light again.

"I shall hold the safety of the man I least care for among these men before me to be of greater importance to me than my own safety. I shall never fail them in danger, but with all my strength and with all my ability I shall stand at their sides.

"What the chief commands me to do, I shall do no matter what I may think of it myself with one exception, always, that he shall not have the right to order me to kill any man, and understanding that in a vote the majority of the men will overrule the command of the chief.

"With all these things in mind, I give my honor and I pledge my word that when there is work to be done, whether we are fighting or fleeing, I shall hold every man here as if he were my dearest brother."

Here he ended and Gloster, having repeated the oath to the last word, considered that the ceremony was at an end. But Dud Rainey now turned to the silent witnesses, and propounded the same oath to them. And every man answered, slowly, solemnly, his eyes never leaving the face of Gloster for an instant, as if to drive every word deep in his mind. He watched Macarthur particularly, as the big chief was repeating after Rainey:

"If I have any old quarrel or grievance against this man, I shall bury it and never bring it to the light again."

Here Macarthur made such a long pause that the others had finished speaking the sentence before he began. His brow was as dark as thunder and his eyes flashing, yet speak it he did in a strained and halting voice which grew smoother with every word until at the end he gave an emphatic nod.

It was a solemn thing to Gloster. He himself had repeated the oath hardly knowing what he did. His mind had been too filled with other things—the strangeness of his situation, and the thought of Joan. But now he realized what he had done.

Even Joe Macarthur, malignant as a plague, had buried the hatchet, and he could not doubt that the big man was sincere to the bottom of his heart. So were all the others. Their gravity was written deep in their faces.

And now, last of all, Dud Rainey himself repeated the oath which he had been giving to the others. That faint smile which never left his lips was gone now. A frown gathered in his forehead. He removed his glasses as though there must be nothing artificial between his eyes and the eyes of Gloster. When he was ended, he shook hands. The others came up one by one and followed his example.

Macarthur was the last, and his grip lingered in that of Gloster for a long moment. Finally his hand fell, and Fatty Guiness broke the strain of the moment by saying:

"The hell of it is that when I'm taking that oath I always see myself already dead for the sake of the new gent. I feel like a funeral for two days."

"You seem to be tolerable alive under the fat," remarked Sliver Martin.

"I'll never die for you, blast you," Fatty retorted. The laughter went around, but not loudly, as the hand of Macarthur was raised and he cautioned them.

"We got to get out of the hollow without waking Joan, boys. We're going to be back here in the morning before she's more'n up and got her breakfast."

It caused the sweat to start from every pore of Gloster's body. They were to ride that very night, then! But, looking down to the floor so that none of them might read the horror in his eyes, he set his teeth and decided that he would find a way of withdrawing before the actual scene of the crime to be was reached.

"Go out and saddle, one by one, boys, so's Joan won't hear," went on Macarthur. "Lead your hosses down through the gap and wait out there until we all are together, then we'll start."

They began to follow his commands while Macarthur drew Gloster to one side and explained to him in detail the plan for the robbery of the Wickson Bank. Two men at the most would be all that were needed to make an entry into the bank. But the other four would be posted at intervals here and there to guard against any possible danger. Now that Gloster was there, it meant that there were five extras.

"An easy job for you this time, Gloster," said Macarthur. "And you'll hook in on your full share of the coin. You ought to be more'n ten thousand dollars to the good before morning!"

Gloster nodded. After all, the thing could be managed. As Macarthur pointed out, this was an inside job and there would be virtually no risk attached to it.

He need not keep the stolen money which fell to his lot. He could simply leave it behind him at the camp when he departed. Or, better still, he could send it back to the Wickson Bank. He would have no actual share in the crime.

And when the good time came and he found that mysterious murderer of Nichols and Springer, he could return to the ranks of law-abiding men with a reputation unstained. By that time, too, he should have found some way to convince Joan that she could not lead the wild life which she had chosen.

Macarthur broke in upon his thoughts. He had been watching carefully the rapt face of the new recruit.

"That's the way it always is," he said. "It's hard to take the plunge. But once you're in the water the swimming is fine. I'd a pile rather have a man that goes at the work slow and with regrets than a gent that makes a game of it right off from the start."

He beckoned Gloster to him, and going to the wall he took down a bridle.

"Gloster," he said, "what you find out in this here gang is kept secret. You know that?"

"I know that."

"It ain't to be used against any man. You've swore to treat the worst of us like he was your best brother."

"I've sworn," said Gloster gloomily.

"Then, look at this."

He tossed the bridle to Gloster.

"What about it?" asked the latter.

"Look it over."

He obeyed, scrutinizing it carefully, but on the outside it was certainly the most ordinary of bridles in appearance. He looked on the inside, and at the top of the headband, half obscured by an incrustation of horse sweat, he found the initials "H. S." cut into the leather.

"H. S.," he muttered to himself. "Who's that? H. S. Hal Springer!"

He jerked up his head.

"Good God!" he breathed.

Macarthur had folded his arms. But although he had to set his teeth to force himself to it, he managed to meet the eye of Gloster.

"Yep," he said. "I done that job."

"And tried to make me swing for it?"

"I'm a hard man, Gloster," said Macarthur, but a faint flush of shame had appeared in his cheeks. "I'd of let you swing and been glad of it. When one gent swings for a killing there ain't any looking for another killer. But now you're one of us. I've swore solemn that I'd treat you like you was a brother of mine. And I'm telling you the truth."

Gloster groaned. There was such a mixture of astonishment and anger in his heart that he was breathing hard.

"I didn't go up there to do no harm to Nichols," Macarthur went on. "I was flat and I wanted to touch the old boy—but

he seen through me, and that made me mad. There wouldn't have been no more than words, though, but when I got mad Nichols got scared and being scared he reached for his gun.

"Then hell broke loose. In a couple of seconds I come back to my senses. And there they lay dead on the ground. I grabbed what was worth grabbing then, being flat, and beat it.

"Gloster, that's the whole yarn. It's the worst thing that I ever done. And the way I let 'em hound you for the job was worse still. But—I'd of let you go to the gallows right up to the time that you got to be one of us. Gloster, if you don't want to serve under me after hearing that, you're free to go where you want to go. If you'll stick with us in spite of that, there's my hand!"

For the split part of a second Harry Gloster fought his battle with himself. But after all, there was no choice. He was free to leave the band, to be sure, but if he left them it meant that he left Joan.

And, in another moment, he found himself shaking hands with the murderer of his two old partners!

CHAPTER XXXII.

RIDERS IN THE NIGHT.

THERE had been no truth in the supposition of Harry Gloster that Joan had gone back to her hut to sleep as soon as he left. Strange as she was, she had been profoundly stirred by the quiet and the dignity of her lover as he left her. And never had her new choice of a way in life seemed so hard to her as when she saw him striding away toward the defile.

Had he paused and turned back to her with a final appeal, she could not have resisted. She would have run to his arms and gone out with him to take his way in the world, no matter what it might have been.

But he went on steadily, with no sign of faltering, and when he had disappeared she was filled with a desperate sense of loneliness. Worst of all, she knew at once that the companionship of the men who were now sleeping in that big house near by could never make up to her for what she had lost in losing Harry Gloster.

She went to the Captain, and when she was still fifty steps away he scented her coming and raced to meet her like a great happy dog when it sees its master. He threw a swift circle around her, then came to a pause in front of her with his head tossed in the air and his eyes shining.

They had a talk together after their own way. She whispered to him while she rubbed his nose, and he whinneyed his reply no louder than her own hushed voice. Of him she asked her questions—where were they going? What would they see, and what would they do on the long trail which they were starting together? And then a gust of wind struck them and brought the stallion's head up, pointing north, and the cry of an owl blew vaguely and mournfully to them on the breeze.

That was the answer, as she had known even before she asked. They were bound north and north.

She went back to the hut, and there she sat cross-legged at the entrance like an Indian under the flap of his tent. So she saw Harry Gloster ride back in the hollow, saw him dismount in front of the cabin door, saw him stride inside.

Instantly she was up and after him, and from the outside she spied on everything that followed. She saw him holding Macarthur, and she noted with wonder and awe how impotent were the struggles of the chief in Gloster's grip. She heard the denunciation. She saw Harry Gloster tear from the earth his own "pebble" and cast the vote for his admittance. She saw the crowd swept off its feet.

And then she understood what it was all about. He had asked to join simply that he might be near her. It could be for no other reason. They were fools if they looked into that frank and open face of his and did not see that he was not of their kind and never could be like them.

She herself could see it clearly enough, just as clearly as she knew that he could never have been guilty of the murder of the two old miners. And, being confident, she did not even ask to hear an explanation.

He had joined that crew in order that he might be near her. That was the meaning of his quiet air as he said good-by that night. It was not to her that he was saying farewell, but he was leaving his old life in order to enter a new one with her.

It touched her to the heart. She was on the verge of running in and warning him back from the step he was about to take. But she kept herself in check. She must not interfere now. Her care must be to remove herself from the hollow and ride off to the north so fast and so far that Harry Gloster could find no trace of her. And when he found that she had left the valley, she was confident that he would leave the band.

So, with that resolution, she watched until the oath had been taken so solemnly. Then she hurried away and found the Captain, led him by the mane to her hut and, beyond the farther side of it where eyes from the larger house could not perceive her, she saddled and bridled him. It was not necessary to warn him to be silent and cautious of his movements. The great horse had fallen into the very spirit of the thing. Her stealthy approach and her whispering voice had been enough to make his steps as careful as that of a stalking cat.

She had saddled him and was ready to mount when she saw a man carrying a saddle go through the starlight into the pasture. She reined the black horse back into a copse and there waited. She saw the fellow—it was the familiar bulging outlines of Fatty Guiness which she recognized—saddling his horse and then riding out of the hollow. He was no sooner gone than another man went out from the cabin, and then a third.

One by one they were capturing their mounts and departing from the hollow; and the meaning of it gradually came to her. This was the reason they had retired so early that night. There was a midnight ride ahead of them. And would Harry Gloster be one of the party?

The hope that he would not was hardly born when she saw two men whose height and bulk showed them unmistakably to be Gloster and Macarthur, leave the door of the house and go out into the pasture. In another few moments, they were riding out of the valley. What was there that she could do?

She must simply wait until they were gone, of course. Then she could ride north as far as she pleased and before Harry Gloster and the rest came back to the mountains she would be far away beyond their ken. No horse of theirs could ever keep pace with the stallion once they were started!

She went out to the defile and looked north in the direction she must journey. But yonder the noise of seven horsemen was going down the mountainside, and all of her heart turned strongly after them. What was coming to Harry Gloster on this night of nights?

She had heard Buck Daniels describe a train robbery, at one time, and she had never forgotten the tale of how the great engine had been brought to a screeching halt at the turn, and how the robbers had rushed out from the place of concealment, and how one man went to help that member of the gang who had boarded the train at the last station, then worked himself forward over the roofs of the cars until he dropped down into the cab and with his gun at the head of the engineer had forced that poor fellow to stop the train at the appointed spot.

When the train was halted, some had gone to keep eyes and guns over the passengers and make them come out and stand in an orderly line beside the track that they might be most conviently robbed. Others made the engineer flood the firebox, so that after the robbery the train could not rush on to the next station, give the news and spread the alarm by telegraph through the mountains and start five hundred armed men swarming on the trail.

Then the gang had approached the mail car, the door had come open, and from within, two men with double barrelled shotguns began to pour out a withering fire—and when she came to that part of the picture it was harry Gloster whom she saw receiving the bullets in his breast and falling on his face—there to lie in the mud until his body was kicked out of the way!

She drew a great breath. The North

Star was as bright as ever, but for Joan, it had lost some of its power. If she could not prevent or help, as least, she could be a witness. And if they fled again, she might help them flee!

She turned the head of the Captain to follow, but as she did so an eighth horseman started out of the woods just beneath her and began to wind slowly along the hillside. Was this some man of the law, trailing the band? She stared until her eyes ached, but she could make out nothing more than his shadowy outline. He disappeared into the trees, and she followed. She could not keep away, now!

From a hill top, she marked out the course which they must be taking. They were crossing the summit, and dipping down on the father side, heading almost due west. She took a different course, so that she might not be heard following them, and she sent the Captain in a wide detour to cut in ahead of them.

It was wonderful, indeed, to be on his back as he worked through the mountains by night. There was no need of sunlight for him, apparently. One might have thought that this was the trail to home which she had put him upon. Through the trees and over the rocks he picked his steps, plunging down wild slopes which brought Joan's heart into her throat.

They came to the ravine which she had selected as being the one through which the riders must pass. And, ten minutes after the Captain had brought her there, she saw them pass.

They rode in single file on account of the broken nature of the ground with Macarthur, as his duty was, leading the way and making the trail. Behind him came the six, and last of them all was the bulky form of Harry Gloster. She could almost have reached out and touched him!

They passed on, but still she did not ride out. For there was yet another man to be watched, and this was the one she had seen on the mountainside following the others. A full ten minutes she waited, and then he came, jogging his cow-pony steadily along, a man who wore his hat in a strangely familiar way, canted to one side. He passed, and his horse stumbled.

"Steady, boy!" muttered the rider, and rode on.

But he left Joan stunned behind him, for she had heard and recognized the voice of Buck Daniels.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

GIRLS IS QUEER

I KISSED her in the moonlight. . . . Boy! She didn't move away;
I put my arm around her, held her tight. . . . You bet!
I certainly felt funny, sure! And acted like a jay,
And then I kissed her more with all my might. . . . Gee whiz!
I really can't describe it and I thought it very queer. . . . Whoops!
I guess I held her tight as tight could be. I did!
And so, quite confidential, she asked me what I meant. . . .
I don't know, good land below us, don't ask me!

I took her to the movies. . . . Gosh, at fifty-five a throw;
The subway fare . . . we got there two for ten . . . we did,
We ate at a table d'hotey; zicks, cost two bucks of real dough,
And on her birthday spent right smart again . . . sure enough!
I took her out to Coney so that we could shoot the chutes. . . . Whee!
And eat and see the freaks and watch the sea . . . swish . . . swish!
And last night, when I met her, she asked me kinda queer . . .
If I was sure I loved her. . . . Hully gee!

N. Brewster Morse.

Dan Barry's Daughter

By MAX BRAND

Author of "The Night Horseman," "Black Jack," "The Seventh Man," etc.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A FATAL MISCHANCE.

SAMUEL CARNEY was enough of a Christian to believe in the efficacy of forgiveness of sins, but if he had had any doubt it would have been removed on this day. Even a sense of shame had left him. He was filled with a mild peace and feeling of purification.

But the vision which occupied his mind substituted, in place of the unseen visage of the Almighty Father, the fat and rosy face of Oscar Fern. The devotion which he felt for the good natured banker and millionaire was a cross between the devotion of a soldier for his captain and of his son for a father.

New lights also had been breaking in upon him. As he reviewed his labors for the bank he decided that there might be at least a shadow of doubt as to whether he had been absolutely essential to the welfare of the institution. He mused, also, upon the often repeated remarks concerning the stupidity and luck of Oscar Fern.

Here, after all, had been another one of Oscar's pieces of luck. He had saved the bank and himself a loss of a hundred thousand dollars, buckled to his side the services of his cashier who was faltering from the straight and narrow path, and avoided a scandal which would have shocked the community to its core.

It could be called luck, to be sure, but it seemed to Sam Carney that there was another name for it. One might call it instinct, say. At least, there was no doubt that that kind and shallow eye could sometimes look deep, deep beneath the surface.

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If he had not seen Carney's mind, at least he had seen his suffering.

It was a strangely humbled Samuel Carney, therefore, who prepared for the work which lay ahead of him that night. It was not pleasant work. It meant that he must ride after dark out of the valley and into the foothills to the deserted shack on the old Tompson ranch.

And Sam Carney was not at all fond of riding. He spent his days at his desk, his evenings at his newspaper and his books, and the nights puzzling over business problems and fighting for sleep. A spin through the fresh open air was an unknown novelty to him. But it was necessary this evening.

Men were coming down from the mountains into a death trap which, they had been assured by his own lips, would not exist. He must warn them off. Therefore, he saddled a horse and rode away as soon as the darkness fell.

On the way he thought over what he should say to Joe Macarthur. That was not to be a pleasant interview. He could hear the curses and see the black looks in prospect. But all of this must be ventured.

He had in his pockets five hundred dollars in cold cash. That might help to soothe the wounded feelings of the outlaw and pay him for the wasted ride of the night. If it would not do, he could not help it.

One fierce ten minutes of conversation, and then the affair would be off his shoulders forever, and he could go on to face the prospect of a happy and peaceful life to the end of his days, music for his daughter, health for his wife, and the undying love and faith of his employer! Tears rose to his eyes at the thought of Oscar Fern, and when the lump melted away from his throat, he swore aloud that the rest of his life should be spent in the service of the banker.

His spirits, naturally enough, began to rise. And the ride was not so uncomfortable as he had expected. He had his daughter's favorite saddle horse beneath him, and the wise footed old gelding moved along with a gait as comfortably smooth as flowing water. He picked his way with an unerring skill over the easy road and the rough.

It was a two hour ride to the Tompson place. He would reach it long before the outlaws arrived. But, no matter for that, he must be there in plenty of time. Otherwise there was a chance that the gang might get by him and go on to the trap. For he had agreed with Macarthur, in their final understanding, that if he were not at the Tompson shack when the troop arrived, it might be understood by the robbers that all was well and that the plans went forward without interruption.

That all was well! He shuddered as he thought of the precautions of Oscar Fern. Not before that day had he suspected that there was such a bloodthirsty fighting strain in the banker. But Fern had thrown himself into the game with the enthusiasm of a boy.

Twenty men had been employed. They were not casually picked up about the town, but here and there through the valley Fern had sent his couriers. They had gone to call on old ranchers who had been in the Wickson Valley in the days when the cow business was the only business—men who had lived with saddle and gun and who had forgotten the use of neither.

They called also upon young fellows who were ardent hunters and who were noted for their skill with weapons. And, as the afternoon wore on toward evening, one by one they had come to call on the president, all flattered by the summons to visit the rich man unless, as was the case with not a few of them, they had mortgages on which interest was overdue. They had been brought into his private office, and there they had received their instructions, with Samuel Carney present.

That was Oscar's way of printing on the mind of every one of his men the fact that Carney represented the power of the bank. And although Carney appreciated that fact, it was a gruesome affair to him.

He heard Fern tell each man that a "tip" had come to him from a source which could not be revealed, that the bank was to be robbed that night. There was, indeed, just a possibility that the robbers might become suspicious and not attempt to push through the work. But there was at least one chance in three that they would make the effort.

And he wanted a strong reception committee in waiting in case that attempt were made. Therefore he had picked out the best men in the valley to fight the fight. For one thing, they would confer a great obligation on him; again, they were upholding the law; and yet again, they should all be liberally paid for the night's work—or waiting—if they would accept his money.

Money, however, was not what they wanted. Carney saw their eyes light at the prospect of battle, and grim a fighter as Joe Macarthur was, he knew that there would be more than he could do to meet such warriors as these.

No, the entire gang would go down full of lead unless they were forewarned. And, since some of them were sure to be wounded and not killed outright, before they died they were certain to give the name of the cashier who had first promised to betray the bank and had then betrayed his tools.

And this would as effectually ruin the reputation of Sam Carney as if he himself had been caught in an act of theft. Such were the reflections that filled his mind as he made his way toward the Tompson shack. And they so excited him that he began to push the horse forward relentlessly. But when he reached the shack, there was no sign of any one near it.

He lighted matches, and by their light he examined the ground around the shack. All the hoofmarks were old which had traveled that trail that had once been a comfortable wagon road. No party of hard riders had gone by that way this night.

He sat down at the door of the old cabin and began his vigil. But it was a lonely place to keep watch. Every murmur of the wind through the thousand cracks and broken roof of the shack sounded like a secret whispering of voices behind him.

Besides, he must not be found by any chance wanderer sitting in front of this deserted cabin. It would make a strange story to be told in the town the next day. And Carney was in no situation to have stories about clandestine meetings spread abroad.

He changed his place. There was a cluster of saplings, growing thick, about fifty yards from the house. It was on rising ground, and in the starlight he could sweep all the approaches to the cabin with his eyes. To these saplings he removed himself, tethered the horse in the midst of the trees, and began the wait.

He consulted his watch. It was still early in the night, and the robbers were not apt to reach the cabin before two in the morning, at the earliest. The ground was hard, so he broke off a few brittle boughs to make a comfortable seat. There he rested with his back against the trunk of a tree.

It was a pleasant place and a pleasant night. The hills rolled gently toward the east and south, and behind them shot up the stern mountains. He had never liked the mountains. He always connected them with sweat and burning sunshine or cold nights and hunger. In the winter, when snow collected on the summits, he was fond of looking up from the valley on the white caps, and then he would rub his hands and congratulate himself on the life of sheltered comfort which he lived.

But this evening the air was soft, the stars were bright, and the song of a far off coyote gave a weird and thrillingly romantic touch to the moment. The mountains, too, now that he was so close to their feet, were more imposing than ever, but there was a more beautiful majesty about them. He decided that he must unmake his mind about many things, and, just as he had discovered a new point of view about Oscar Fern, he must look again upon all of his old preconceptions.

And so, with these mild thoughts, he was lulled fast asleep! He wakened again, with his heart pounding, and a wild sense of alarm in his brain. He looked about him. All was unchanged. Except that the stars were dimmer, the mountains more easily visible—yes, there was an old moon standing in the eastern sky!

He whipped out his watch. The first match broke in his trembling fingers. But the second gave a light by which he saw that it was three o'clock. He stood up stiff and straight, with a stifled cry. He had slept at his post and they had gone by him.

"God help me—and them!" moaned Carney, and ran out into the trail.

There, on his knees, he lighted more matches. And instantly he saw the hoof-prints. It looked to his inexperienced eyes as if twice ten horses had passed. He turned down the road. There was nothing in sight. The moon haze closed together not so far away.

He raced back to his waiting horse, loosed the rope, flung himself into the saddle, and spurred with might and main for the town. He had an hour—if they did not begin their work until four. A whole hour. And that was enough to reach the town if the horse held out!

Low over the neck of the gelding he bent as he had seen riders in pictures leaning over racers, and the good old bay bent to his work with all the strength in his body and his heart.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE VENGEFUL BULLETS.

THEY had made the trip down from the mountains perhaps half an hour before their schedule time, so well had the horses done their work and so eager were the riders to get to the town. The clearness of the light from even that old moon which hung in the sky had worried them a little as they came down the valley, but before they reached the town of Wickson the high blown haze of clouds had passed across the surface of the moon and made it as dim as a sickle of tarnished tin. Under these favorable auspices they reached the town itself.

Sweeping in a half circle around it ran the river which had furnished the wealth to the valley, now a dull and muddy trickle in a shallow basin, for most of the current had been drawn off higher up the course to water the fields. The hoofs of the horses sounded hollow on the bridge and then they entered the long main street.

Wickson was soundly asleep. At least, there was not a light shining in a single window and the houses watched them go by with blank faces.

At the first corner they separated, as the previous agreement had been. Gloster and Macarthur rode on up the main street, the others turned to the sides. They were to circle around the block and come in again to wait near the bank in case of an alarm.

All was so carefully arranged that there appeared slight danger of any interruption, and yet the heart of Harry Gloster was hammering as he went on with the leader. Not a word passed between them, however. They left their horses behind the bank and passed around to the front. The key which the cashier had furnished to Macarthur fitted the door. It opened to them, and they stepped into the black interior.

All was perfectly still, except that the wind which had entered with them rattled a paper somewhere in the distance. But when the door was closed behind them, there was a perfect quiet.

With his electric pocket torch Macarthur cast a swift ray of light around the place, so swift indeed that Gloster saw nothing but a blur of many outlines, but to the leader all seemed to be as clear as day, for he went on now, with a perfect assurance, and after Gloster had stumbled over a chair he fell in behind Macarthur.

They found their way straight to the safe, on which Macarthur flashed the light, partly hooding it with his hand, so that only a dim radiance fell on the combination. He took a slip of paper from his pocket and as he read the numbers Gloster worked the combination, and as he worked it his heart sank within him.

Once, indeed, his numbed fingers refused to stir the disk and he was about to stand up and confess that he could go no farther. But if he did that, he was erecting a wall between himself and the chance of seeing Joan again. So he kept on until, with a faint click, the heavy door yawned slowly wide before them.

There was little time for conscience to work then. In a moment Macarthur had unlocked the drawer which Carney had previously designated. It was a deep compartment, and from it he drew out small packages done up in strong paper. Half of them he gave to Gloster. The other half he stuffed in his own pockets.

"This here job," he said with a grin finally, "is what you might call getting the stuff de luxe, eh?"

"Not so loud!" gasped Gloster.

Macarthur raised his eyes quickly.

"You look as white as a sick kid," he commented. "Kind of weak in the stomach, Harry?"

The latter shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't let that worry you none," Macarthur went on. "That's the way with the best of us the first time out. It sure bites in on a fellow his first trip. But the second is easy as pie. That's always the way. Let's have a look at that stuff."

"For God's sake!" breathed Gloster. "Are you going to waste time *now?*"

Macarthur chuckled, and his voice sounded deep and strong in the room.

"There ain't no danger," he declared. "This is a cinch for us, Gloster. The old town is sound asleep. I can almost hear 'em snoring. Can't you?"

Gloster set his teeth. Since it had to be endured, he could at least compel himself to be calm.

In the meantime, the leader had torn loose one of the wrappers which secured the packages, and it exposed within a thick little sheaf of greenbacks. They were stiff with newness, and as he ran his fingers over the edge of the pack they rattled like playing cards.

"Only twenties in this lot," murmured Macarthur.

He added suddenly: "What the devil is this?" And with that he tore the money from its sheath. He stared at it for a long moment and then let it flutter in a green cloud to the floor.

"What's wrong?" Gloster asked.

"By God," Macarthur muttered to himself, "I didn't think that the little shriveled up shrimp would have the nerve to try it on me!"

"Try what?"

"Shut up with your fool questions," Macarthur responded. Then he added, between his teeth: "It's queer. All queer—"

He snatched another package from his pocket, tore off the wrapper, and gave the contents a hasty scrutiny. This he dashed to the floor with an oath.

"Counterfeit — stage money," he groaned. "I'll turn Carney into a sieve for this; the fool ought to have known it!"

"Good God!" murmured Gloster. "Then they double-crossed you?"

"He has!"

"That means they're watching for us to-night."

"It does," answered the leader.

"Then—for God's sake, hurry, Joe! We'll have to ride for our lives."

"Damn our lives," said Macarthur. "We've lost a fortune to-night."

And he shook his fist at the safe as if that senseless mass of toolproof steel were to blame.

Next, however, he drew his revolver and held it in a stiff clutch. He gestured to Gloster to do the same. And as he made the motion, there was the soft but unmistakable sound of a door being closed somewhere near them.

All the strength passed out of Gloster's big limbs and left him shaking. It appeared to him that the sound of that closing door was the sound of the prison gate clanging loudly upon him, and the voice of the hangman at his ear.

Even Macarthur had started. Now he switched off his light.

"Fire at anything that moves!" he cautioned, and led the way back, stealing with wonderful skill among the desks and chairs.

But Gloster did not draw his gun. If there was fighting to do, he would use his hands to the best of his ability, if only the blood would run back into the muscles of his arms again. But he would not take a life—

They had come to the outer corridor when half a dozen shadows sprang up before them, soft and confused objects against the light colored wall. And the gun of Macarthur exploded.

The flash showed Gloster, for the smallest glimpse, six resolute faces, six gleaming guns. The reply was a blasting volley which would have torn them to pieces had it gone home, but, at the instant of Macarthur's shot, the two big men dropped for the floor, Macarthur as a clever maneuver, and Gloster because his shaking legs refused to bear him up.

"Take 'em alive!" yelled a voice.

The six plunged at them. A knee struck

Gloster on the ribs, another grazed his head, and half a dozen hands tore at him, striving for a grip.

That contact of flesh against flesh sent the blood shooting hot through his veins once more. He heaved himself up. His assailants spilled off him, then grappled close, but not close enough.

Near him he saw Macarthur struggling with the men who had fallen upon him, and while the assailants were slight, Macarthur was cursing in a steady stream, although softly, as if even now he were striving to keep from alarming the town—as if that thundering volley whose sound still made Gloster's ears ache had not aroused every one within a mile of them.

But in the meantime he had one arm and hand free—a hand which could be balled into a lump as hard and as effective as the jagged head of a club. One man had his arms around his waist, driving him back against the steel fence behind him.

He struck that fellow above the ear, and he went down limply. A swinging hook brought down the next. The third leaped back with a cry of alarm from this fighter of such inhuman strength and swung up his gun.

It was never discharged. Unseen ruin sped at him through the darkness. There was only the flash of the fist before his eyes as it struck. Down he went, toppling head over heels, and firing his bullet into the ceiling.

Then Gloster turned to Macarthur. The latter was big enough to have handled two men, but here were three of them, and each a sturdy fellow. He was down on the floor, his curses stifled as his face was bashed against the concrete.

Gloster picked off one man as he might have picked an apple from the ground. He dashed him face down on the floor. The victim lay without a quiver.

He leaned and crashed his swinging fist into the back of another's neck. The third he tied into a knot and cast away. Then he jerked Macarthur to his feet.

"Damn them!" gasped Joe, by way of thanks. "Now fast work, Harry!"

He plunged for the door with Gloster at his heels. They smashed against it. It had been locked from the inside and the key was removed. But now a bullet smashed the pane of plate glass and showed them the best way out. In the street there was a steady fusillade and a rising roar of voices. They beat out the rest of the glass with the butts of their guns and scrambled forth.

They could see well enough, and everywhere they looked was ruin. At their feet before the door, sprawled on his back with his arms thrown wide, lay big Lew Cambridge. His face was unmistakable. He had come loyally to the defense of his leader and companion when the crisis came. So, too, had Sliver Martin, whose lean body was now crouched near by taking vain shelter behind a concrete hitching post while he emptied his revolver at the windows of near-by houses.

And every one of those windows, so it seemed, was filled with fighters who had waited prepared for the signal for battle. Against the blackness of the interiors of the rooms were fire-fly glows as rifles and revolvers spoke. The doors of the bank were a ruin from the concentrated fire which had been centered there. Now Sliver dropped to his side with one gasp and did not stir.

Fatty Guiness and Dud Rainey rushed up, bringing a group of led horses.

"Joe! Joe!" cried Fatty. "For the love of Heaven, Joe and Harry, where are you?"

There was heroism worthy of any battlefield. No gallant soloier who ran out from the trenches to carry in a wounded comrade better deserved a decoration than Fatty and Rainey. But the reward which Fatty collected at once was a bullet through the head which drove him headlong to the ground. One of the horses squealed with pain as a bullet raked across its back, and the whole group bolted, saving only Rainey on his own horse.

He was out of the saddle, now, and across the street came Babe Cooney. He had stood off making a separate point of diversion. But now he came to join the others at their Waterloo only to receive a bullet from behind that dropped him on his face in the dust.

And all of this in the space of three seconds as Macarthur and Gloster clambered through the broken door!

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE STURDY MEN OF WICKSON.

CERTAINLY Oscar Fern had chosen his men well! Never had there been straighter shooting, although indeed that mass of lead which was sweeping toward the bank was sure to wash down any life that might be in its way.

"Around the corner!" cried Macarthur, and they darted away.

They were out of the main focus of the bullets, to be sure. People could no longer shoot at them from three corners. But right across the street were five men kneeling, each with a magazine rifle from which they were pumping a stream of lead. The windows on that side of the bank began to go out with a crash, and Macarthur, with a gasp, dropped to his knees.

Two unwounded bandits remained, and of these only Rainey had a weapon in his hand. He fired at that kneeling row of marksmen. The center figure dropped. The four remaining fled to a place of safety and the wounded man crawled after them.

But, still, where could the fugitives go? There was only one horse for the two unhurt men and for one wounded—and this was Rainey's gallant pony, which had trotted around the corner to join him. There was only one horse for three men, and the whole town, as could be told by far off shooting, was rising.

And then it was that they saw two horses racing down the main street—Fern's men had chosen to charge home, then?

No, for the voice of one rider was shouting: "Gloster! Harry Gloster!"

And he recognized Buck Daniels, with an answering shout of joy. Yet Daniels did not reach them first. From behind him shot a great black horse with a slim figure in the saddle—a giant of a horse which came sliding to a halt before them in a cloud of stinging dust.

"Harry!" cried Joan. "Harry, are you here?"

He had no time to feel horror that she should be there.

"He'll carry two—swing up behind—quick!"

But there, gasping in the dirt beside him, was Joe Macarthur, to whom he had sworn, looking into his eyes, that he would be faithful. He scooped the heavy body up in his arms, ran forward, and tossed Macarthur across the pommel of the saddle.

What was that which Macarthur had groaned as he lifted him? "Save yourself, Harry. I'm done!"

"Down the street, Joan," Gloster shouted, "as fast as the horse will run!"

"I can't leave you!"

"For God's sake, Joan!"

Buck Daniels had drawn up beside them and behind his saddle had leaped Dud Rainey. They moved off down the street with Gloster racing between the two horses, and behind them was a new roar of guns and a shout of rage.

They were out of one trap, indeed, but they were already in the jaws of another. Straight before them a dozen men ran out into the street and threw themselves on their bellies. In another instant the bullets were whistling.

There was no facing that fire. Aiming by starlight, and shaken with excitement, the prone men were missing, to be sure, but they were finding their range. In a moment they would begin to plant their shots.

Down the street there was a confusion of yells as men were mounting horses which had been kept carefully concealed in back yards of the houses. Now they rushed for the pursuit. Ahead and behind, then, their way was totally blocked.

Buck Daniels, pushing to the lead, turned them into a new direction. The double doors of a livery stable yawned wide to their right. A single lantern burned dimly in the interior. They might sweep through this place and gain an exit to the open country behind. Even that, however, would not avail them long, with only two horses for five persons. But in the stable itself they might be able to get new mounts.

So, with a roar of hoof-beats, they dashed into the old building. Some one rushed for cover, throwing away a rifle in his haste,

but Dud Rainey dived from the horse of Buck Daniels and caught the fellow with a flying tackle. Down they went with a crash.

By the time they had risen, the others had halted their horses, Joe Macarthur lay stretched on the floor where Harry Gloster had laid him gently, and Joan, dropping from the saddle on the lofty Captain, was kneeling at the side of the wounded man.

In the meantime, with a yell of exultation, the crowd in the street poured around the stables. On either side and to the rear they ran, firing in the air in blind joy, and it was plain that they felt that the group was trapped. Half a dozen ran for the open double doors themselves, but Buck Daniels ripped up the floor with a few bullets at their feet and drove them helter-skelter back.

There was still something to be done before they took the building from the rear. Harry Gloster sped to the rear entrance, and from the single door, fired blindly, half a dozen times, at skulking figures. The reply was a rain of bullets, and one or two yells of alarm, but the skulkers disappeared behind cover and it might be taken for granted that they would not soon try to approach the stable from that direction.

So Gloster returned to the corner in which the others had gathered and where little Dud Rainey had his captive by the collar. The latter was a much larger man, but his spirit was completely cowed. Fear of death filled up his eyes, which were starting from their sockets.

The first care was for the wounded man. He had been shot through the body and he was bleeding fast. Buck Daniels made a brief examination and reported that only a good doctor could give help to the injured outlaw. But how could they bring a doctor in to him?

From the shadow behind the door, Harry Gloster called to the crowd:

"Is the sheriff out there?"

"We don't need a sheriff," thundered some one, "to handle a lot of hounds like you! We'll give you a bellyful before we're done with it."

There was a loud roar of applause which was taken up with a cheer from the distance. For men were gathering rapidly from every part of the town toward the sound of the firing.

"Is there anybody out there in command?" thundered Gloster again.

"They've got enough. They'd rather hang than get their medicine now," came the answer. "Send for President Fern. He'll do the talking in good shape."

Fern's voice came across the street. And it was not raised high, yet it pierced through the tumult easily and reduced the others to silence at once.

"If you want to surrender," he said, "I'll see that you are brought safely to the jail. Is that what you want to know?"

"We've got a man badly hurt in here," Gloster replied. "If we bring him to the door, will some of you carry him to the doctor?"

"And get our heads blowed off when we come for him?" taunted some one. "We wasn't born yesterday, old son!"

"What's our guarantee that you'll play fair and square?" asked Fern.

"I'll bring him out and stand beside him," answered Gloster. "Will that be a guarantee? If anybody goes down, I'll be the man."

"That's fair and reasonable," said Fern. "We'll deal fairly by you, my brave fellow! Bring him out."

Gloster went back to the others, but he found that there was a decided difference of opinion. What he had said had been heard, of course, by his companions in the stable.

Joan, working with flying hands to bandage Macarthur, said nothing, but she raised her head and gave him a look that he could never forget. How he should interpret it he could not tell, but it seemed to him that her eyes overflowed with her joy of him. But Daniels and Dud Rainey were strongly against the risk.

"Somebody will take a chance and dump a shot at you," said Rainey. "Besides, there isn't a chance for poor Macarthur. When a man gets a bullet where he got one, it's all over."

Daniels nodded agreement, and Joe Macarthur himself groaned from the floor: "You've done noble by me already, Harry. God knows that you ain't had any call to

be so square. Let me die here quiet. It 'd ease me a pile more than thinking of being hung if I should get well."

They might as well have talked to the wind. Gloster leaned over the injured man, gathered him in his arms, and brushing through the others as if they had been no more than stubble, walked to the open door and through it. He marched on to the center of the street. There he paused.

"I've got a man that may be dying," he said. "If there's anybody yonder with a drop of mercy in him, come out and take him to a doctor."

There was no answer. That yawning door behind Gloster was like the open mouth of a cannon. Presently Oscar Fern shouted: "I'm coming, friend. Boys, won't one of you help me carry him in?"

He started running across the street. That appeal was too much for the manhood of the citizens of Wickson, and a round dozen followed. They swept around Harry Gloster.

"We've got him!" said one of the last comers. "Why not take him back along with his wounded man?"

"There'll be none of that!" announced the authoritative voice of Oscar Fern. "By no means! I've never seen a braver thing than this in my life, and not a hand is going to be raised against this man!"

Two or three of his companions took the heavy body of Macarthur into his arms, and the outlaw groaned with the agony of their touch.

"Gently!" cautioned Fern. "Dr. Sand will take a hand with him—and do his best! And you, my friend, what's your name?"

"Gloster," he answered.

That name brought a growl from the bystanders. It was too much to ask that they should be allowed to permit that notorious murderer to escape even for the moment. But the admiration of Fern appeared hardly shaken.

"Gloster," he said, "no matter what there may be in your record, this is a fine thing. And—I wish you luck, lad, and better habits. If we take you alive out of that building, you'll find a friend in me!"

Gloster thanked him briefly. He stepped to Macarthur as the latter was being carried away.

"Joe," he said, "good luck—fight it through!"

"God bless you, Harry," gasped the wounded man. "But I'll see hell before you do. I'm fixed."

So Harry Gloster turned away and walked slowly back across the street to the door of the stable. Not a shot was fired behind him and that, after all, was a fine tribute to the sturdy men of Wickson.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A STRATAGEM OF DESPERATION.

HE found Buck Daniels and Dud Rainey in close conversation when he rejoined the group. As for Joan, she had withdrawn into the background, where she kept the Captain quiet with her hand against his neck. His head was turning constantly from side to side, and his eyes flashed as though he realized the full significance of the scene through which he had just galloped, but he did not stir from his place.

Rainey was trying to persuade Daniels that it was foolish for him to throw in his destiny with theirs when he had taken no part in the attempt on the bank, but it was not hard for Buck to prove to Dud that he was wrong. There would be a mob trial and mob justice for every unwounded man taken from the stable that night.

They would not wait to ask questions and learn the truth, but like a pack of hounds which has been lately blooded, they would be eager for another kill. There was no real reply to such a statement, and Rainey fell silent.

They turned back to their captive, whose fear had a little abated. They demanded to know the two best horses in the stable. He took them at once to the stalls. The prosperity of the town of Wickson was amply attested by the condition of its leading livery stable. For there were fully thirty animals in the stalls and most of them were excellent mounts.

There was no need for him to point out the best of the lot. A tall, wide shouldered

roan, apparently capable of bearing even the bulk of Harry Gloster, and a slender limbed little brown mare stood out head and shoulders above the rest. They saddled these and brought them back in silence. For it was plain that they had only one chance, and that chance was really a delusion. They must attempt to break out through the front or the rear entrance to the stable and ride to liberty.

It was, indeed, worse than hopeless, for the street in front of the stable was lined with fine marksmen, all grouped within easy range of the door of the stable. Rainey went to the rear of the building to explore and came back with a report that the roof of every shed near the stable was thick with armed men. Whether they tried the front or the rear exit, there was sure to be a flood of lead poured at them.

It was agreed that the best thing for Joan was to leave her behind in the stable. After the attempt to escape, when the crowd invaded the stable itself, they would find her and let her go. Nothing else could be done with a woman by Westerners. And one glance at her would be sufficient to convince even the harshest of the mob that she was no Amazon.

It was Rainey who thought of the stratagem which gave them at least a ghost of a hope.

"What's the worst mark in the world to shoot at?" he asked.

None of the others could answer.

"What about a gang of horses stampeding?"

They nodded. Any man who had seen a mob of horses running wild, their heads packed full of fear, dashing on with a mad impetus which would carry them with equal recklessness into a fence or over a cliff would have to agree that it was almost impossible to pick out one mark in the midst of the swirling, racing bodies.

"But what's that got to do with us?" asked Gloster.

"There's two horses here we have to ride," answered Rainey. "But there are twenty-eight more, and twenty-eight will make a pretty imitation of a stampede. Suppose we get them ready, put our horses in the middle, and then let go their halter ropes and give a yell? They'll be ready for fast work. Listen to them now."

For the stable was in a growing turmoil. In every stall there was a fretting horse. They had smelled powder smoke. They had glimpsed, here and there through the cracks in the wall, the flashing of guns outside. And, above all, they had heard the battle shouts of men, which drive all animals into a frenzy of fear and excitement.

It was done at once. They led out the stamping, rearing, snorting horses and gathered them four abreast in the driveway of the stable. Their lead ropes were tied together, which would keep them from scattering. In seven ranks they were ranged. In the center the riders would take their station and move with the mass, although at the imminent danger of having themselves bumped out of the saddles.

There was only one thing left, and that was to say good-by to Joan. She had not stirred or spoken since she took up her place at the side of the great black horse. Buck Daniels came to her first.

"Joan," he said, "to-night will show you what a free life means. This is the sort of thing that it runs into. When a gent tries to run free and take his own way, he runs into hell early. There's only one smooth way of traveling, and that's to keep with the herd, the way they go. I ain't saying this with the hope of changing your mind, but give it a think, Joan. There's something in it!"

She had listened impassively, her wide eyes fixed upon his face.

"It was all for my sake," she said at last. "There would have been none of this if I hadn't left. And, oh—dad—"

She paused there on that old word, and it shook Buck Daniels as if she had been a man and struck him heavily.

"Don't say that, honey," he answered gently. "No matter what comes out of this break to get away, it don't make much difference to me. You see, Joan, I been tired of living for a considerable stretch now. It took something out of me when Dan Barry died. It took a pile more when Kate followed him. After that I was sort of living on the inside of a lie. And that don't do a man no good.

"Sometimes, in the old days, when you called me 'dad,' it used to make things worth while. But I knew that before the end came, I had to tell you the truth. And that took the salt out of life. Now I come to the final round-up—and I'm glad of it!"

She bowed her head.

"Say so-long to me, Joan. And say it with a smile. I'm aching to see you smile, dear."

"If I could live it over again!" she breathed fiercely. "Oh, if I had another chance, I'd make you happy, dad, if it took the last drop of blood in my body!"

"Things can't be changed, Joan," he said. "What happens is what's planned. The older I get, the more I see it. There was a time when I loved Kate Cumberland and had a hope that I might make her love me some day. That day never come. There was a time when I tried to kill Dan Barry.

"But when the wind-up comes, what have I been? Just a tool, Joan. Something else took hold of me and used me to work for Dan and Kate and then used me to work for you. I ain't regretting. But that's been my life. And you'll do the same way—not what you try to make out of yourself, but what's been planned for you away back in the beginning. Good-by, dear."

Somehow, she was able to raise her fallen head, she was able to smile into his face, and then he was gone. She saw Dud Rainey before her.

"Wish me bon voyage," he said cheerfully.

"Good luck! Good luck!" she whispered. She caught one of his hands. "Nothing can happen to you. I know it—I know it!"

He laughed and stepped away. And there was the towering form of Harry Gloster. His face was in shadow. But she knew that it was working, and that words were forming in his throat and never reaching his lips. Then he was gone after the others, in silence.

She tried to cry out to stop him, but she could not speak. She tried to run after him, but her feet were weighed down with lead. With all her mind and heart turned to ice, she watched the final preparations.

They went about their work calmly, methodically, as men should do. There was no delay, no trembling, no vain regrets. The three saddle horses were brought into the center of the group of stable animals. Then Dud Rainey, with a gun in either hand, went to the back of the stable, and they heard him kick open a door and begin to blaze away into the outer night.

There was an answering roar of guns which quite drowned his. Then came a yelling of a hundred men, swarming back to meet the rear attack. That was the moment for which they had waited.

Rainey came racing back and leaped into his saddle. And all three, yelling like wild Indians, turned the stable horses loose. Out they thundered! The din of their hoofs turned the stable into pandemonium, and from the street came the blaze of revolvers and rifles.

Yet it was not a third of the volume which it would have been a little before. Many a score of good men had run toward the back of the stable when it appeared that the attempt would be made in that direction. Those who remained were enough to have riddled ten times as many fugitives with bullets.

But they had no fair mark. Out from the stable rushed a mass of horses, their heads stretched out with the fury of their speed. And it was hard indeed to mark the ones which actually carried riders on their backs, for those riders were flattened across the pommels of their saddles, showing almost nothing to the eye.

Men who stood on the level of the street could do nothing. Only those who were posted in the windows had a half chance, and these, although they turned loose a plunging fire, were shooting wildly. They had expected, at the most, four horses. Here was a herd of wild animals plunging down the street. And, indeed, it seemed to the excited imagination of more than one man that there was a rider on the back of every animal—and that the four had been transformed by black magic into a host.

There was no time for a second thought. That stream of horseflesh swept to the left as it shot out of the stable door and it

whipped away like a thrown javelin. All in a moment, there remained only a cloud of dust which made rifle work like shooting in a fog and which stung the eyes and the nostrils.

From every crevice, with wails of fury and rage, they ran into the street. They turned a storm of lead down the street, but it is an old maxim that one good marksman can often do more damage than a score of hysterical fighters.

Not a single man was ready to whirl and fire in a new direction when, from the door of the stable, another figure started forth on an immense black horse, plunged through them, and raced away down the street with a form no larger than the form of a boy flattened along his back.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

COMPASSIONATE SHADOWS.

THE room in which Joe Macarthur lay was filled with silence and the stir of great shadows. Not very far away townsmen were besieging the companions of the robber, and although they would have had their guns ready to kill in a moment had he himself been able to stand and fight, yet now they were all subdued.

For Joe Macarthur was dying. So the doctor had pronounced, rising from his examination while his shadow rose on the wall beyond him, black, shapeless and immense.

There was only one source of light in the room, and that was a single lamp which stood on a center table. It had been held close so that the doctor could see his work until he gave a signal with a brusque gesture that he was through, or at least that he had seen all that he needed to see. Then the lamp was replaced on the table. And it cast just enough light to print black silhouettes which were as ugly as caricatures on the walls behind the watchers.

Perhaps a dozen men stood in the room. Not that they were shirkers who were unwilling to take their part in any fighting which might go on around the stable where the others were besieged. On the contrary, most of these were old hands—men who had been in brawls before and knew all about the kick of a revolver against the heel of the hand and the hum of other bullets past one's own head. They had seen such things in plenty and the raw edge of the novelty had been worn off for them.

They left younger men, therefore, men who had not yet proved themselves, to press around the stable, hungry as wolves to hear the singing of bullets and fight to kill. For their own part, they knew that there was more of real importance apt to go on within this quiet chamber where the wounded chieftain was lying, so they had followed those who bore him there.

It was a grocery store. Along the shelves the tinned food glittered like a thousand small, dull eyes. Glass cases shone faintly, also. The smell of onions and the earthy odor of potatoes and a peculiar pungency of molasses was in the air. As for the couch of Joe Macarthur, it was a saddle blanket spread upon the top of the low, broad counter over which sugar and flour were wrapped and passed.

The doctor was a busy little man. He had an ungracious personality, and would have starved in a new community. But he had grown up in Wickson, and therefore his peculiarities were taken for granted.

As a matter of fact, he was a dull fellow. But his waspish temper gave him an air that passed for acuteness among the townsfolk. He had no sympathy with pain and sorrow, but his cold eye and his compressed lips were taken as a sign of devotion to his science, and they were forgiven for that reason. He now stood beside Macarthur and looked down into the steady but fast fading eyes of the robber.

"What d'you want?" he asked.

"Eh?" murmured Macarthur.

"What is there that you want?"

Macarthur closed his eyes. His lips twitched. But when he looked up again his face was once more calm.

"I'm as far gone as that, eh?"

"You're far gone, Macarthur," snapped the doctor. "So if you want anything, shout for it now. Whisky?"

His brutality did not bother Macarthur. The latter had been brutal in turn, many a time. He was willing to take all the bit-

ter dose of medicine and drain it to the last drop, but he raised his right hand to stop the flow of words.

"How long have I got?" he asked.

"Maybe five minutes."

"No more'n that?"

"I'm a doctor, not a prophet. You might last out an hour, I suppose. But now I've done my duty and I guess I'm through?"

He turned a hasty glance over the assemblage. Not a man had stirred. During the time of his examination there had not been a whisper in the store. But there they stood in stiff attitudes.

And when they heard his judgment, some one removed his hat. The others followed the example, and all unconsciously. No matter where and how Macarthur had sinned, he was swiftly passing toward a place where they were all bound. There were no young men there, and death is most terrible to the young. But even these hardened fellows were impressed by the sudden snuffing out of so much power of hand and brain as that which now lay stretched upon the counter.

"If I have only five minutes—it 'll do. I've got something to say. Has anybody got a pencil and some paper?"

It caused a stir. A dozen hands shifted into pockets. Papers and many pencils were produced.

"Carney—you're the man for this. You understand these things better'n the rest of us."

So designated, and urged forward by hands on either side, Samuel Carney went slowly to the dying man. He had not failed to note the quick turn of the head with which Joe Macarthur had heard the name pronounced. And Carney, his brain reeling, crept slowly forward, feeling that if Macarthur was facing death, he himself was facing something which was far worse!

After all, how beautifully just it was—how accurately destiny was dealing with him! On the very day when he had confessed his sin and when that confession had been rewarded, as he felt, with utter absolution, he was to stand beside a man who had been his unwilling victim and write down the words which were to damn himself forever in the eyes of the community.

For there was no mistaking the cruel satisfaction which sparkled now in the eyes of the dying man. He had been trapped and betrayed and now he should have the consummate satisfaction of betraying the traitor. Yet there was no drawing back for Carney. His gray face was set. He prepared to suffer the crucifixion.

After that night he could never face the rest of the world. But there was a short cut to a refuge. The gun in his house was stanch enough to send a bullet into his brain, and he could confidently leave the care of his wife and of his daughter to the great heart of Oscar Fern. They would not suffer. They could go East and change their ruined name for a new one.

"I got something to say," went on Joe Macarthur, "that 'll give Sam Carney a lot of fun to write down."

He paused, and his wicked grin froze the very heart of the poor cashier.

"Come closer the rest of you," he commanded. "I want you to hear it—in case he ain't going to write it down—fast enough!"

They glided obediently closer.

"Put something under my head. It's hard to talk lying flat this way."

Again they obeyed.

"Whisky!"

A flask was instantly at his lips.

"Now I'm ready—"

Here he coughed violently, and again more weakly. A bloody bubble rose to his lips, broke, and he wiped away the red drops with the back of his hand. Then his arm dropped and hung limp down from the counter—a great long arm, so that the fingers actually touched the dust.

And it flashed through the mind of Carney that this moment the outlaw had actually come to death's door and that there would be no narrative.

But no, now he was speaking. His voice was low and hurried, but each word was perfectly distinct. If the stumbling pencil failed to record those words, a dozen ears would be ready to swear to them the next day.

"I ain't got much time. I got to hurry—I got to begin with the most important part of what I got to say."

He turned his head and rolled his eyes around the semicircle of faces.

"Is what I say going to be believed?"

There was a general nodding of heads. And an unaccustomed touch of mercy made some one step closer and advise him that he had better save his strength and do no talking.

"To hell with that!" answered Macarthur with a faint shadow of his old sneer returning. "I got the life of another man on my hands. I got to get rid of it! So to start right there:

"It was me that killed Nichols and Springer. Gloster didn't have nothing to do with it. He wasn't at the mine. He was away hunting. When he come back and found the two of 'em dead, I guess he knew how folks would figure. That little old mine was opening up a rich vein. Everybody would of thought that he'd bumped off his two partners to get the whole thing into his hands!"

He rolled his eyes around at the others, savagely challenging them.

"You'll be thinking that I'm saying that just because I know that I'm going to pass out and that I might as well save the neck of my bunkie while I'm about it. But, for God's sake, boys, believe what I'm saying. I'll tell you all the straight of it. I've been gunning for Gloster. But he's showed white clear through. There ain't no yaller in him.

"One thing more. He joined the gang. But he didn't join it for the money nor because he'd been hounded into going where he could get help ag'in' half the sheriffs in the West out after his head. He joined because Joan Barry was up in the hills where we was hanging out, and he wanted to be near her. She's down there in the stable."

"A *girl?*" gasped the listeners faintly, for the starlight had been too dim and the speed of the black horse too great to enable them to distinguish anything definite about the rider in the saddle on the Captain.

"A girl, I say. And Buck Daniels is with her. He ain't had any part in this fracas. He come trailing Joan, and she come trailing us, most like."

"Is there *anybody* in that stable," asked the doctor dryly, "that's broken the law?"

"Dud Rainey," answered Macarthur. "God knows, Dud is square. But I got to tell the truth to save the rest. And every word I've spoke is the truth and the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

A great tremor passed through his body. He gasped. And then his eyes closed.

Surely, thought Carney in his agony, the man would die now. And out of his heart of hearts went up a prayer, wordless, and stronger than words, to the God of mercy, that he might be spared this worse than death.

"He's making a good end," said one of the watchers. "He's clearing off his slate. And if what he says is true, we'd ought to get Gloster and Daniels out of that mess safe and sound."

"*If* what he says is true!" added another significantly. "A mighty slim chance that it's true— Look—he's gone now—"

His voice died away, for the eyes of Macarthur had opened again.

"You lie," he breathed. "So help me God and everything holy—you lie! I've spoken the truth—Gloster is innocent—and—"

He coughed again, appeared to half strangle, and then went on speaking in a rapid, rattling whisper which the others could barely make out.

"Now I got one more thing to say. I'm going to tell you how come that I ran into this trap to-night. I'm going to tell you how five straight shooters and fast workers come to be butchered by a bunch of skunks and squareheads like you gents. Them five deaths, they go all to the account of one sneaking, double-crossing hound that 'll go to hell fast on account of what he's done. And that man is—"

There was a sharp crackling of guns. In spite of themselves, the listeners started with an exclamation which drowned the name on the lips of Macarthur. And, before he could speak again, there was a loud noise like thunder near at hand, and then the entire town seemed to be shouting with one voice.

"They're breaking out!" cried one of

the men. "They're gone! And we've missed it!"

A stampede started for the door, and in an instant the room was deserted. Even the doctor left, not that he wanted to be in the fight, but that he would be glad enough to be one of the first to arrive after the danger had passed.

There remained only the dying man and Samuel Carney. And the latter looked down into the dull eyes of Macarthur.

"You lucky dog—lucky—lucky!" whispered Macarthur.

"Listen to me," cried Carney eagerly. What mattered it to him that the rest of the town was in an uproar? He had only a few speeding seconds in which to attempt to clear himself with a man who was bound for another world.

"Listen to me, and try to believe me, Macarthur. I rode out there to warn you to-night. My nerve failed me to-day. I went out to the Thompson place this evening and waited for you. The trouble was that I got there hours too early. I waited, and while I was waiting I fell asleep. When I woke up, you'd gone by with your men. I lighted matches, and saw by the light the marks of the hoofs of your horses going down the trail.

"Then I jumped on my horse and rode like mad for Wickson. But nothing was any good. By the time I came in, guns were crackling. Macarthur, that's the truth. I'd taken out five hundred to pay you for the trouble you'd taken to work the deal through."

"If Rainey's taken, would you use that five hundred to clear him? Would you use it to hire a real lawyer to fight for his skin, Carney?"

"I would! I shall!"

"There ain't no use. They've butchered them all by this time! But—you wouldn't do it anyway. There ain't no truth in you, nothing but lies—nothing but lies! And me after what I've been and after what I've done—to be took in by such a skunk as you!"

"Macarthur, if you'll—"

"Don't talk. I ain't got time to listen. There's other things. God, what a pile I got to think about! What a pile! Only—"

He paused.

"Is Gloster going to be safe?"

"And Daniels too, Macarthur! You've cleared them completely!"

"Thank God for that!"

Another pause.

Suddenly he started.

"Shoot low, boys, and shoot fast!" he cried aloud, and then dropped back with a thud upon the counter. This was the death of Joe Macarthur.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

WHITE MAGIC.

THE ray of light which struck through the darkness and among the trees was instantly lost again. Joan reined back the Captain to the spot from which she had first seen it, and there she made it out again, a steady yellow streak through the blackness. She located it carefully and then struck forward again.

All day she had been wandering on horseback since they had broken out of Wickson just before the dawn. But the stallion went up the slope as easily as if he had not done a day's work for a month.

She had taken care to approach the place stealthily. But now she rode straight in upon it, and there she found a very small fire which had been built in the center of a number of large bowlders. There was no one beside it, neither were there any footprints, for there was nothing but rocks on which to step.

Yet she hesitated only an instant, and then called loudly: "Harry! Harry Gloster!"

There was no answer. She called again, and, since the silence continued, she sank down upon a stone and, dropping her face upon her hands, gave herself over to the thoughts which had been riding with her all the day.

Then, for no reason, she looked up suddenly, and saw that Harry Gloster was standing before her. His rifle was in his hand. A blood stained rag was tied around his face, and the face itself was pale and drawn, with something in it which she had never seen there before.

There was an unyielding hardness in his look—a gloomy desperation. But the blood and the bandage banished the smaller details, to her mind.

"Oh, Harry!" she cried. "They've hurt you!"

He looked down at her in wonder, as she arose; then he touched his head as if suddenly remembering of what she could be speaking.

"That's nothing. Just a nick."

She breathed a sigh of relief.

"And dad? Is he back there waiting? Didn't he recognize my voice? I want him here, too, before I tell you the great news!"

There was no answer from Gloster.

"Harry!" she whispered. "What happened—where is he?"

"Where he can't answer you, Joan. But he left something for you that he said you'd never seen."

He took out a large oval locket, and handed it to her. She received it with trembling fingers.

"Tell me the whole truth," she pleaded.

"He rode on with the rest of us after we got out of Wickson. He said nothing about being hurt, but after we'd decided that each of us had better go his own way, and Rainey had gone off, I said good-by to Buck, and noticed that he was riding shaky in the saddle. I sneaked along behind.

"As soon as he was beyond a hill he sort of fell out of the saddle—more like a fall than a getting off. He pulled off his coat. Then I saw what had happened and went up to him."

He paused.

"In the end," he concluded, "Buck wanted me to give you his love if I ever saw you again, and give you this pair of pictures."

She opened the locket, wiping away her fast falling tears to see what was inside. Within she found two pictures, one of a smiling girl enough like Joan to be her sister. But the fashion of her clothes was that of twenty years gone by, and she knew it was her mother, unhappy Kate Cumberland. The opposite face was the strangest she had ever seen. It was that of a young man, with dark hair and eyes, a face spirit—thin and wonderfully handsome. There was a suggestion about it that the man would instantly leap into violent action.

She did not need to be told his name. It was her father, Dan Barry, from the knowledge of whom she had been so carefully shielded through so many years. She closed the locket again, but still the two faces burned themselves into her brain.

Her heart had softened when she looked at her mother; it had leaped when she saw Dan Barry at last. There was a strange feeling that he stood, with a gaze just as in the picture, directly behind her. And, indeed, she knew that something of him was still living in her own spirit.

She looked up to Harry Gloster again, and by his expression she knew that she had seen the resemblance also. That was why he stood so far from her.

"I came to tell dad," she said slowly, "that you and he are free. Joe Macarthur, as he lay dying, made a full confession that showed you had nothing to do with the killing of Nichols and Springer, and that there was really no crime to charge to either of you. I came to tell you that you were both free, and now—"

He neither stirred nor spoke, but watched her with a cold and distant regard that froze up her power of speech. Fear was taking her by the throat.

"Harry," she whispered, "what has happened? Why look at me like that?"

"I saw Daniels die, Joan. He died for you. And I swore then that I'd never take a step to win you away from that wild freedom that you love. That's your life and that's your happiness, and God pity the man that tries to step between you and it."

"But if I come to you, Harry, and tell you that I know how terrible and how foolish are the things I have done—"

"Joan, a step toward me would mean—"

And so, suddenly, they were in each other's arms.

A wedge of wild geese, flying low, sent down their wavering and dissonant chorus, but Dan Barry's daughter did not hear.

THE END.

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